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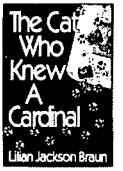

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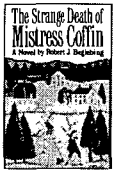

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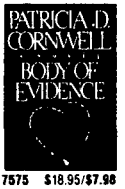

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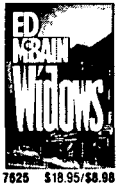

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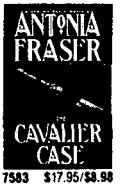

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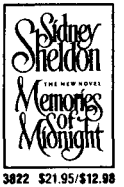

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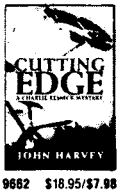

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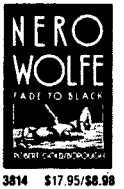

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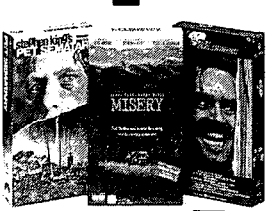

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

More new authors! Pete Hautman, who brings us "The Death Angels" in this issue, hails from Minneapolis, where he is a freelance writer of business-related matters for various corporations. He is an amateur mycologist, which no doubt inspired this first story—and clearly also has a wonderful sense of humor.

Simon P. McCaffery, managing editor of a national magazine publishing company in Tulsa, counts skin diving among his hobbies, and watery matters are central to "The Deep End." He has previously authored several horror and science fiction tales, one of them scheduled for a forthcoming Bantam anthology, *Book of the Dead 2*. He also, he tells us, spends time at snow skiing, racquetball, and "collecting old books of horror, mystery, and children's tales."

David White, of Dallas, Oregon, has spent the past seven years in Tokyo teaching at a college there. He has written several articles about Japan, but "Ukiyo: The Floating World" is his first published short story. "I'm very interested," he says, "in Japanese mystery fiction. . . . I feel that we are just beginning to realize how interesting and unique Japanese popular culture is."

On the subject of old, rather than new, stories . . . we want to thank author John F. Suter for bringing this issue's Mystery Classic, Lord Dunsany's "A Royal Dinner," to our attention. As he says, it has to be "the ultimate armchair detective story!"

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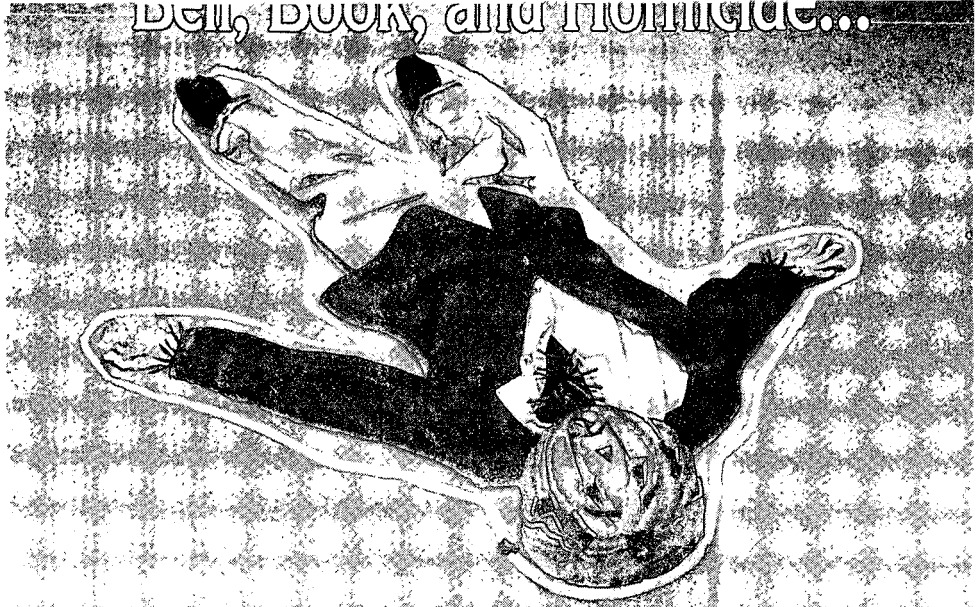

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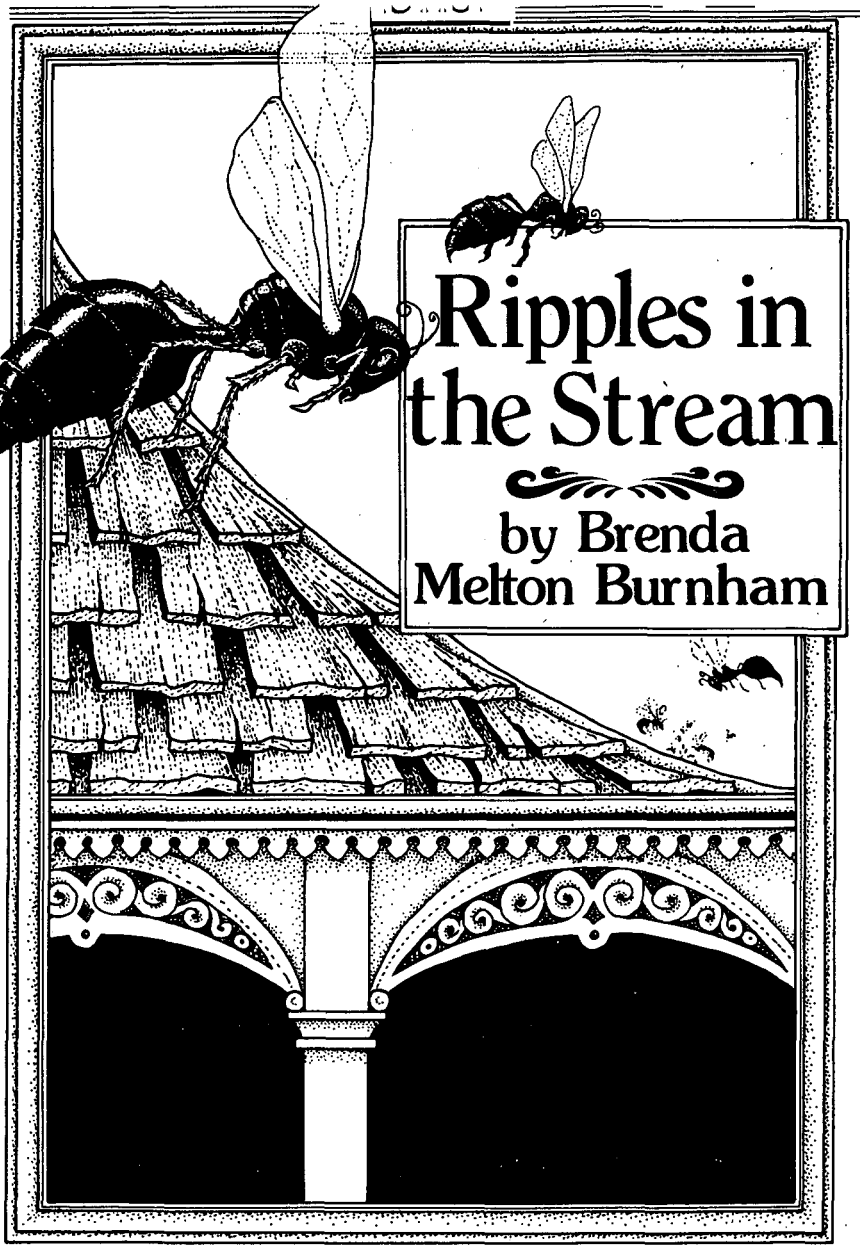

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Lucy Dean Groves entered the Cavanaugh family with a splash. At least, that's what the local newspaper reported, calling the wedding reception "the social event of the season." I had maintained my usual policy of drinking just enough champagne to render the event fuzzy, so I was delighted to avail myself of this important information from such a trusted source as the Golden City *Courier*.

My brother Harry frequently admonishes me about my attitude. "For heaven's sake, Jane, you don't partake of life," he says. "You view it as an observer. Why don't you relax and enjoy yourself? Travel, take a cruise, do something."

Of course, Harry had a silly fool for a wife and three children who take turns driving him to distraction, whereas I am a spinster of considerable means and indeterminate age. That may be why Harry rates travel so highly while I am content to sit in Golden City and watch life go by.

Okay, not indeterminate age. Only the truly stupid and those new to town are unaware that I was born three days after the great Crash and two days after my father hanged himself. (Thereby becoming merely another example of how poorly Cavanaugh males deal with adversity. He should have hung around, if you'll forgive the phrase; our financial position improved dramatically during the Depression and the war, due to another trait of Cavanaugh males—the ability to make money from other people's misery.)

To come back to Lucy Dean, the first ripple I can testify to occurred at my sister-in-law Flora's birthday party, some six weeks after the wedding. Teddy and Lucy Dean had returned from their honeymoon in Tahiti, and she was regaling guests with stories when I arrived.

"Hot? Honey, it was awful. No wonder those people run around with hardly any clothes. The mosquitoes were as big as helicopters and poor little me, allergic to insect bites! I tell you . . . oh, hello, Aunt Jane."

I do not care to be addressed as Aunt by my own nephews and nieces, let alone their mates. Particularly not when it is pronounced with a short *A*. But I was polite. "Please call me Jane."

"Gracious, I could never do that. My mother taught me to respect my elders." She gave her tinkling little laugh. "Thank you so much for the silver tea service. It's lovely."

"It belonged to Teddy's great-aunt Harriet. I thought perhaps he might like to have it."

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"Did it? How quaint."

Our duties performed, we both turned to others in the crowd who were more to our individual tastes, and I thought no more about Lucy Dean until after dinner.

Most people, when they reach middle age, prefer to treat birthdays as a necessary evil. Not Flora. Her celebrations grew more lavish every year, as if cake and company would erase those signs of aging that her jars of creams and lotions couldn't.

Poor Flora. She really is terribly insecure, and not without reason. Therefore, it was understood by family and friends that the only mention of age at these functions was to assure her that she was "looking younger every year" or some such inanity.

We had reached that stage in the evening when the cake had just been cut and everyone had sung Happy Birthday. As Flora reached for her first package Lucy Dean said, "So tell us. How old are you?"

Flora's face flushed. Teddy harrumphed. Several of the younger children tittered. Harry touched his chest as if having a spot of heartburn.

When no one else spoke up, I said, "It is not necessary to know the years in order to honor the date."

"How silly. We're all family and good friends here." Lucy Dean smiled sweetly. "It's not as though we couldn't figure it out."

"Open my present first," urged Frankie, the seven-year-old grandchild, bored by the adult games. Flora happily complied, and the moment passed into history.

Actually, reading it on the page now in black and white, taken out of the context of the party itself, it sounds more than it seemed at the time. But then that's often the way it is: one doesn't notice a number of small things until they begin to add up to something larger.

And that is precisely what Lucy Dean's remarks began to do.

"Did you hear what Lucy Dean asked Cousin Wally?" my brother Arthur said to me two weeks later. "She wanted to know why he made all those trips to Houston. Right in front of Corinne. Kept at it, too, which didn't help. It was awkward as the devil."

Since everyone in town, with the possible exception of his wife Corinne, had a pretty good idea what Wally did on his trips to Houston, I could well imagine how awkward it was.

* * *

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"Lucy Dean told Uncle Herb he ought to retire so Teddy could move up to his job," my second cousin, Edna, whispered to me when we were getting our hair done. "Can you imagine? A new in-law messing in the family business? Said it was time for 'younger, fresher minds.' I was shocked, Jane, I can tell you that."

There are a passel of Cavanaughs in Golden City, not to mention the rest of Kern County, and we all understand family. Most of us learned it early.

Two years after my father died, my mother, who was a county Cavanaugh some degrees removed, married his younger brother. In the next six years she gave birth to my three brothers. (My brother Vincent was a true example of a poor Cavanaugh male. He barely made it through high school, then had the stupidity to enlist in the Marines only months before the Korean conflict began. His death there at least elevated him to some status in town.)

When I was sixteen, my mother took me aside to explain, very delicately, what she called "the nature of men." Since she wasn't ordinarily the confiding type, I took the opportunity to ask about my father and her subsequent remarriage.

She sat very erect and thought carefully before she spoke, as always. "The Cavanaughs are *somebody*. Your father, well, I expected better of him. But done was done. I was only twenty-four when he left me a widow. What was I to do?"

She smoothed the already perfect drape of her voile dress. "I wouldn't have married just any man, you understand. Your Uncle William was young. So was I. He was single. I was . . . available. And he was a Cavanaugh. Family is important, Jane; never forget that. I like to think of each of us as tiny creeks feeding into the stream of family, which carries us on to the river of life. No matter what else a Cavanaugh is, he or she is family."

But not to Lucy Dean, apparently. At the rate she was going, she would manage to offend every one of us by Christmas. She had plenty of time. This was only early June.

The ripples were spreading wider.

Since Lucy Dean and I were separated by three decades, not to mention habits and tastes, I didn't run into her again until commencement weekend. Arthur and Louella threw a party for their oldest grandson having survived the rigors of Golden City High. How in the world the young man was ever going to make it past his first week of college I couldn't imagine,

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but then college graduates these days aren't all that bright.

I took my gift (a collection of Shakespeare; he could always use it as doorstops) from the trunk of my car and hauled it into Arthur's house. The festivities were already in progress.

"Come on in, Jane," my brother greeted me, relieving me of the heavy package. "The youngsters are in the rec room. Some of the ladies are fixing the food, and the rest of us are in the living room. Take your pick."

"I'll visit the kitchen and then join you."

"I'll have your bourbon ready," he promised.

"There you are," Louella greeted me as I entered the room. "We all agreed Jane's the only one who can get the whipping cream to come up just right, so we saved that job for you."

I put on an apron and set to my task. Corinne stacked ham slices on a platter while Flora iced a large chocolate cake. Arthur and Louella's oldest daughter, Merrilee, sat at the table arranging cold cuts on a platter. In the seventh month of her fourth pregnancy (a condition that had never been kind to her), she was a timid mouse who whispered when she spoke. Her husband Larry had the brains and temperament of a goat.

While I admit to a limited knowledge in that area, the mental image of the couplings of a mouse and a goat is not a pretty one. I can state that the offspring are singularly unattractive.

We had nearly finished our various chores when Lucy Dean burst into the room.

"Oh, good," she exclaimed. "We're not late at all. I told Teddy there was no rush, but he is such a worrywart. Hello, Mother Cavanaugh," she said to Flora, planting a kiss on her cheek. "Hi, everybody."

I leaned back out of the line of fire, so Lucy Dean headed for Merrilee. Halfway there she stopped and threw up her hands.

"My gracious, darlin', you look like a watermelon with a tumor. Didn't you ever hear of the word no?"

Merrilee burst into tears. Louella scurried to her side, making soothing little sounds. Corinne's mouth dropped.

Flora, to my surprise, said, "She can't help it if she gets toxic."

"Toxic?" Lucy Dean exclaimed, arching her eyebrows. "And here I thought she was pregnant. Silly ole me."

Merrilee sobbed louder. Louella half lifted her out of the chair and led her from the room.

"Goodness," Lucy Dean said into the silence afterwards. "I didn't

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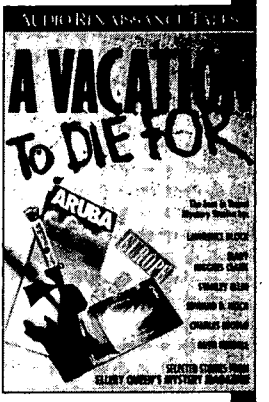

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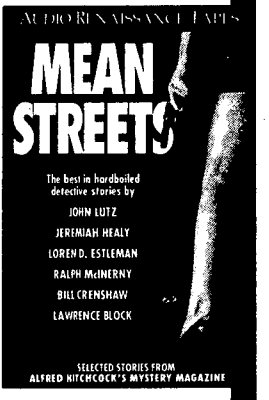

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realize becoming a mother could make you so nervy. Well, I must dash over to the rec room and hug the grad. You don't think you've beaten that cream just a shade too much, do you, Aunt Jane?"

Merrilee started having contractions in the middle of dinner, which caused some consternation among the guests. Not being the maternal sort, I didn't accompany the family to the hospital, choosing instead to go home.

Home for me truly was home. My grandparents had built the house in the early 1900's, a huge drafty place with an old fashioned kitchen and plenty of bedrooms. I had grown up in this house; taken lessons on the upright piano in the parlor, dressed in the clothing stored in trunks in the attic.

My siblings and I had run barefoot through the grounds. We didn't consider it a good summer unless we had been stung at least once by the honeybees that fed off the flowerbeds or the wasps that rebuilt their nests in the same places in the orchard every year. I knew which boards squeaked and how to make the old stove work. I knew when the robins would return and where they nested.

When my mother took ill, I moved into my stepfather's old room, he having died some five years before. After my mother's death I redid her room into a sitting room.

I made myself a cup of rose hip tea and sat up very late that night, thinking of Lucy Dean. The ripples were swelling into waves.

Merrilee's labor lasted into the next day, when she finally produced a tiny, very ugly boy. Louella told me the doctor had advised the couple not to have any more children.

"He said it was too hard on Merrilee. We nearly lost both of them, you know. Jane, I can't help believing deep in my heart that it was all Lucy Dean's fault. If she hadn't said those unkind things, Merrilee would've made it through to her ninth month, and everything would've been fine."

Less than two weeks later, at the monthly meeting of the Lutheran Ladies Association, Martha Ivers said to me, "Teddy's new wife is quite the liberated woman, isn't she? Has so many clever ideas, she does. Said she was going to work for the mill and become their first female executive. Isn't that wonderful? Something about affirmative action or whatever?"

The Cavanaugh Mills have always been run by male Cavanaughs. Female Cavanaughs have worked there, certainly. But

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never in management. It simply wasn't done that way in our family.

Arthur came to visit me the next day. I could tell by his color that his blood pressure was dangerously high again. He'd scarcely sat down when he said, "What are we to do, Jane?"

"You mean about Lucy Dean, I presume?"

He nodded.

"Martha Ivers told me her plan for working at the mill."

"It's not just that. It's . . . it's everything she does. Somehow she always says the exact thing that's guaranteed to ruffle your feathers. I've gotten so I cringe every time she opens her mouth."

"She does have a remarkable talent," I agreed. "Has anyone talked to Teddy about it?"

"Oh, Teddy." My brother dismissed his nephew with a snort. "Teddy's a good boy, and a good salesman, but don't expect much else of him."

A typical Cavanaugh male, in other words.

"Besides," Arthur continued, "he's so dazzled that she married him he can't see straight. He had to tell everyone about her having been the president of her sorority and Miss Larkspur County."

I served Arthur some of my elderberry brandy he likes so much, and we talked of the plans for the upcoming Fourth of July celebration until he gradually calmed down.

Cavanaughs were always represented on the dais to judge the parade floats as they passed. This year Harry and I were to do the honors.

The morning of the Fourth dawned clear, and by eleven o'clock the humidity made your dress limp and your underslip cling to your legs. I've spent my whole life in the Midwest and never complained. I didn't complain now. But it was nice to have Harry's hand to give me assistance in climbing the steps to the platform.

"Hey, Grampa," young Frankie called out from the crowd, and waved.

Harry waved back.

"Hey, Auntie Gimp," he called to me, waving.

Harry's hand went slack on my arm. In our mutual shock I nearly fell backwards to the sidewalk.

"Frankie," Harry called out. "Come here."

The child approached happily, hoping, no doubt, his grandfather would give him some money for fireworks.

"Where did you get that term?" Harry demanded.

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"What term?" Frankie said, mystified by the anger he'd provoked.

"The name you called Jane."

"What? Auntie Gimp? That's what Lucy Dean calls her."

Lucy Dean was right. I am lame. It has been so many years now I scarcely think of it: the shorter right leg, the dreadful scars.

I was a second child. My sister Irene was two years older; a gentle, lovely creature adored by everyone. When I was seven and she was nine, our grandfather built a playhouse for us in the back yard. We spent hours there serving tea to our dolls and playing house.

One day we decided to serve by candlelight. My sister was sitting at the little table when the candle got knocked over. I was luckier; I had been on my feet at the time. The cotton tablecloth, our pinafores and sheer dresses, the rag bodies of the dolls—everything burned so quickly.

Afterwards, during all those months in the hospital, I refused to talk about it. Finally my mother, a very wise woman, said, "It is over. Irene is dead. Jane has suffered terribly. I never want to speak of it again."

And no one had. Until now.

The temperature soared throughout July. I stayed close to home, not wanting to face the fact of Lucy Dean's existence in our little world—nor its consequences.

Flora had taken to stuttering again. Arthur was being treated for his blood pressure. Corinne had left for an extended visit with her oldest daughter, leaving poor Uncle Wally with no desire to travel to Houston while his wife was gone.

Lucy Dean called me the first Tuesday in August. "Aunt Jane," she trilled, "we never see you any more. Are you hiding a lover under your bed?" She laughed her silvery laugh.

"What can I do for you, Lucy Dean?" I asked.

"I'd like to speak to you about something. Would it be all right if I drop by later today?"

"Come around two," I responded. There was no use fighting the inevitable.

When she arrived, I suggested we take our lemonade down to the gazebo in the orchard. "You might enjoy that," I told her. "It's always been one of my favorite places. It's quite a walk. I hope your shoes are comfortable."

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I had sensible shoes on, of course. With one leg shorter than the other, you don't wear flimsy sandals as she did. With scars you don't wear skimpy shorts like hers.

"What a great idea," she agreed. "I've always wanted to see the old homestead. Can I carry something for you?"

The old homestead? She'd never shown any interest before. I led the way through the back yard. "Shut the gate carefully behind you," I said as we approached the wire fence. "It has a tendency to stick."

The branches of the pear and plum trees hung low with fruit. The sun blazed from a sky so blue it vibrated through the summer heat.

"Days like this my mother used to serve us lemonade here," I said, half lost in my memories.

We climbed the two steps up and settled in the old wooden chairs.

"Now," I asked. "What can I do for you?"

"I had just the loveliest idea last night, and I said to Teddy, 'I'm going to call Aunt Jane tomorrow and discuss it with her.' What do you think about turning this house into a museum? We could call it the Cavanaugh Museum."

I stared at her. "And where would I live?"

"You could get an apartment in town, one of those nice condos they're building over on Pine Street. It would be so much handier for you. You'd be closer to everything." She leaned forward in her eagerness as she talked of her plans.

"I see," I said calmly when she came to a stop. "I'd have to think about it, you know."

"No problem. I'd like to see it ready by next spring, though, for a grand opening."

"Oh, dear. I made an applesauce cake especially for us, and here I've come off and forgotten it. If you'll excuse me, I'll go up and get it. I can think about this on the way."

"Can I help you?" she offered.

"Don't be silly. You wait here. I'll be right back."

I stumbled on the top step, missed the next one, and landed hard on the ground. "Perhaps you're right," I said, waving away her offer of assistance. "Maybe it is time for me to make a move."

The phone was ringing as I entered the back door. Martha Ivers was hospitality chairman for the Lutheran Ladies Association this summer, and every month, a week to the day before the meeting, she called in a panic over what she should serve.

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"Yes, yes, I'm sure a fruit salad would be perfect," I assured her after she'd carried on for several minutes. "I'll see you there."

It takes a while to walk along a stone path when you're lame. I balanced the plate of cake carefully, shifting it to my left hand as I approached the fence gate.

Before I could open it, I saw Lucy Dean lying on the other side. I called out to her, but there was no response. I set the cake down and used both hands to shove against the gate. Her body blocked it as effectively as if she were made of stone.

She had fallen face down, her soft blonde hair draped about her shoulders. Her bare arms and legs were blotchy and swollen. Finally I gave up trying to get to her and went back to the house to call for help.

"That must've been terrible for you, Jane," Harry said to me after Lucy Dean's funeral. "Seeing her lying there like that, and not able to get to her."

"It was most unpleasant."

"Who could've known she was allergic to insect stings?" Arthur commented. "Us kids used to get stung by those wasps every year, and it never killed us. Even when they swarmed, like they did on her."

"She must've disturbed their nest somehow," Harry replied. "It's hard for Teddy, you know. She was so young and pretty."

"A terrible thing," Arthur murmured.

"It's over now," I said. "I don't think we should speak of it again."

My brothers nodded their agreement.

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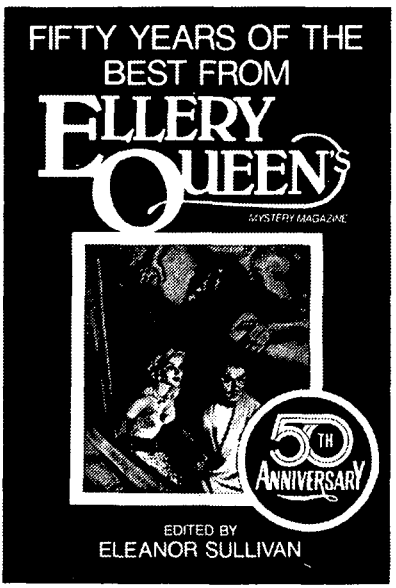

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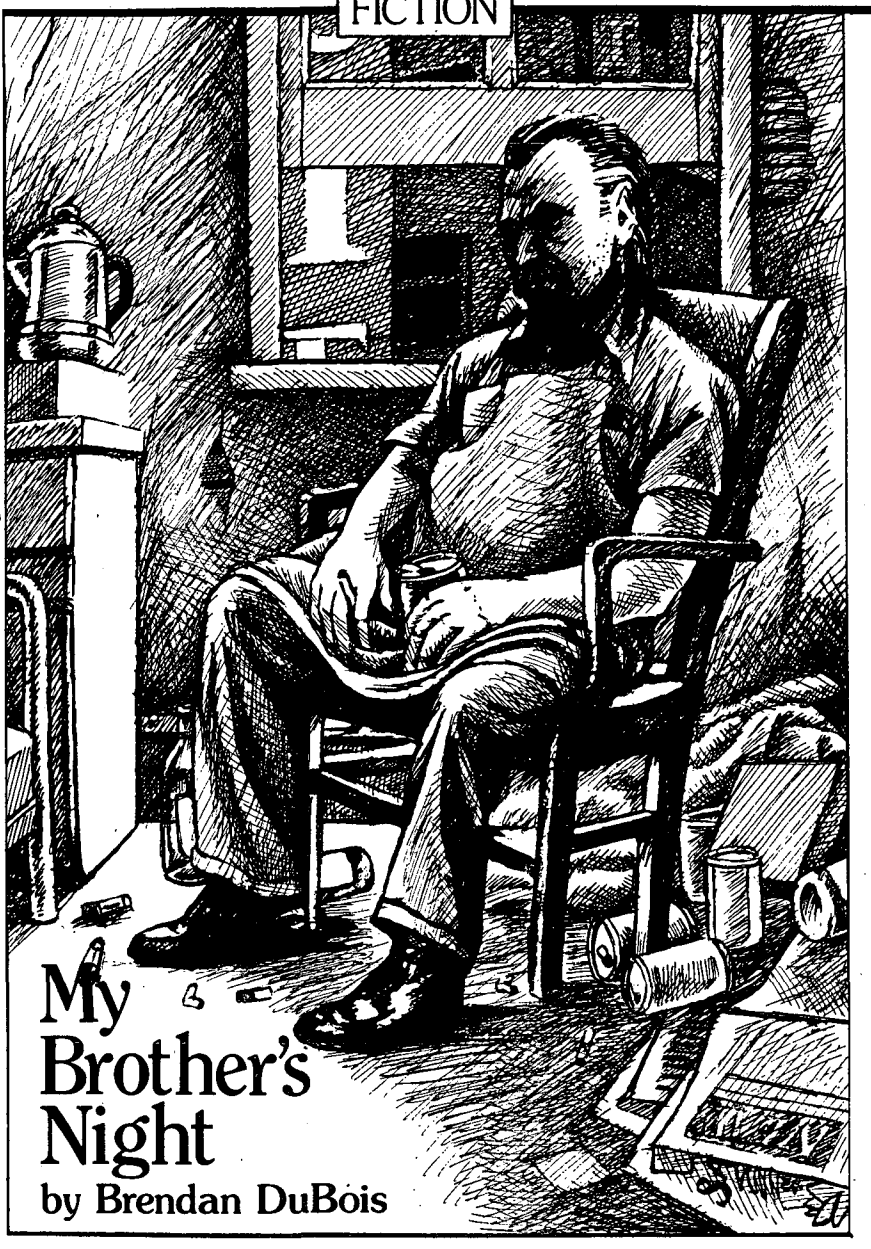

My Brother's Night

by Brendan DuBois

Illustration by Marshall Presbery

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After the fight with my wife Denise, I am in no mood to worry about parking spaces, but worry I do, and I spend almost a half hour going around the blocks until I find a space near the hotel. It seems like my car is the only one on the street that has been washed in months. I make sure twice that I lock both doors to my BMW, and I feel a tingling at my back as I get out to the sidewalk. The hotel is a block away, and near me is a liquor store with barred display windows and a church mission with empty wine and beer bottles scattered along its front sidewalk. It seems convenient to have both of them within walking distance.

The trash is piled so high in the cracked cement gutters that I have to almost jump to get onto the sidewalk, which is fairly difficult considering I'm carrying a bag of groceries.

Then the whispers start, of trouble afoot, and I look around at the people going by, and the men sitting on the tenement stoops, sipping from bottles wrapped in a paper bag. I always listen to the whispers. They had gotten me far, from a vo-tech high school and not much else to managing one of the three biggest car dealerships in this part of the state, and now they are telling me to get moving. I'm not too worried about the car—it has the latest alarm system, and the insurance is paid up. But I worry about me, about slouching through these dark streets, carrying a brown paper bag of groceries and with a six hundred dollar suit flapping in the warm summer breeze.

I walk fast, feeling little glass vials crack under my feet. The smell around me is awful, like an open sewer or the breath of some beast, sighing and heaving along the dark alleyways.

At the hotel two of the five letters on the sign are burned out and flicker dimly against the darkening sky. I go through the open doors of the lobby and avoid the elevator and run up the two flights of stairs. On the landing a man wrapped in cardboard and newspaper snuffles and growls at me. I go along the hallway, which smells of old socks and urine, and I knock at a door marked 23 in dull gray numerals, waiting for a stranger with the same last name as me to answer the door, wanting to make sure he is alive.

Three hours ago Denise was in the kitchen, arms folded, a gin and tonic in one hand. Her brown hair, shoulder length, is streaked with gray. She wears a simple flowered dress whose cost years ago would have fed my parents and my brother for a week, and her light blue eyes are not happy.

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"I don't see why you have to go, Owen," she says, leaning against the counter that contains the espresso machine and the microwave. "What do you owe him?"

Memories tug at me, and I focus on what is in the refrigerator. The double doors are open and I'm trying to remember someone else's tastes. It's hard to do. I start removing bottles and packages almost at random and begin filling up an empty brown bag on the spotless floor.

"I owe him a lot," I say.

"Hmph." She sips from her drink. "He won't take money. He won't take a job from you at the dealership. What makes you think he'll take the food?"

"On occasion, he's been practical," I say. Ketchup, I remember. Ketchup on everything, including scrambled eggs at breakfast. Lord, how that had sickened Father.

"Practical," Denise says. "What has he done for you or your family lately? Can you answer me that? Why do you owe him?"

My hands suddenly feel greasy and cold, and I almost drop the half-full bottle of ketchup.

I can't look at my wife. "Sometimes you can owe a person, even when he doesn't know it."

After the third knock there is a muffled grunt and the clicking sound of locks being undone, and I walk into the small room and immediately begin breathing through my mouth. The stench is terrific. The room is small, with a bed on one side and a small metal table on the other with two mismatched chairs. The floor is covered with cracked and chipped flowered linoleum, with two or three gray throw rugs scattered about, like rags too worthless to be saved. There is a counter near the single window, and on the counter is a small mini-fridge and a single hotplate. Clothes are grouped in piles in the corner, and there are yellowed stacks of newspapers and paperback novels with their covers ripped away scattered on the table. There is another chair by the window, and the window is open, and the breeze does little to blow away the smell. A man is sitting on the chair, having returned there after unlocking the door.

And as before, I feel a little part of me die and wither away inside at the sight of my older brother. Our birth certificates say we're seven years apart, but on this night, it looks more like seventeen. His black hair is slicked back and shot through with gray,

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and above his greasy forehead there's a prominent widow's peak. This time around he has grown a mustache, and both ends are long and straggly. His face is puffy and red, and he looks at me with watery blue eyes as I come through the room. In the heat and stench he is only wearing a tattered pair of dungaree shorts. He has an enormous beer gut, and there are two furrowed scars across the dimpled flesh. On both thick forearms are black ink tattoos of skulls and daggers, the kind you get from amateurs in the state prison who don't care about disinfectant or AIDS. And his right arm is heavily scarred and slightly twisted, and it moves slowly. The arm had been scarred a very long time.

"Owen," he says, his voice raspy. "Come to rescue me again?"

"Hardly, James," I reply. "I gave up on that a long time ago," and an old memory and guilt scrape at me, like a razor being used that has grown rusty and scaling.

He coughs. "Put 'em down and have a seat."

I put the groceries down on the table and pull up the chair, and we sit silent for awhile, and he looks at my suit and says, "Business doing well?"

"Pretty good." I was too smart to offer him a job. That has never worked, and we made a truce some years ago, between his stints up in Concord, that I would never speak of his working for me again.

"Good enough that you still keep that piece in your bedroom?" he says, smirking, and I blush for a moment, as one would do when caught at something by his older brother.

"That piece is a 9 mm Beretta," I say, remembering the time last year when a series of break-ins were plaguing our neighborhood and I had briefly talked to James from Concord. "You should know. You recommended it to me last year."

He smirks. "Shouldn't have listened to me, little bro. You should have picked yourself up a 12-gauge shotgun. More effective in a house. Especially a house like yours, such a nice neighborhood." He looks around the room and smiles and says, "Think you can put me up at your place for a few weeks, while I job hunt? My parole officer would love that, getting me into a stable home life and all that crap."

I'm sure that my mouth is hanging open and I'm running forth some answers in my mind, all the while thinking, Denise, my God, what would she say, when James laughs and says, "Chill, my little brother, chill. I was just goofing you—wanted to see you get a little

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excited. Tell you the truth, if I move in your house, I'm not sure if either Denise or I would last the first evening."

He coughs and strokes at his mustache and looks out the window. Across the way is a darkened office building and, beyond, the bright lights of downtown.

He says, still staring out at the darkness and lights, "In the joint you miss a lot of things, you know, from your favorite ice cream to clean sheets to women. The difference is, it's easier to remember some things than others. It's easy to remember the smell of a clean sheet and how it feels on your skin, the first night you sleep on it. It's easy to remember the taste of chocolate ice cream, and how cold and sweet it is, resting in your mouth, before you swallow it."

He turns to me, his eyes still watery. "I don't know, but in the joint, it don't work for women. You can't remember a damn thing. Oh, you know what you've done and with who and the number of times, but the smell, the feel, the touch. All gone. You can't remember that."

My brother gestures to the window with his good arm. "All those women out there, Owen, and I don't know the first thing about them." He scratches his hairy chest and tries to laugh. "Not that any of them would have anything to do with me, a guy that looks like this. You and Denise getting along still?"

I nod.

"That we are."

"Children?"

"Not yet," and I look away from him.

He chuckles. "You two been together almost seven years. Children not ever, I'd guess. The few things I remember about Denise, I remember well, little brother. She likes things just the way they are. She likes herself, and I don't think she's gonna like seeing her belly bloom up and get saggy and wrinkly. Maybe you two ought to think of adoption or something."

I rub my hands against my pants and try to ignore what he's saying, and I say, "Your parole officer have something lined up?"

He rubs his right arm, the scarred one. The scar tissue is pale pink and ropy against the white skin.

"Yep. Night work. But not the type of night work I'm used to. Of course, I can't do that type of night work any more. Cons can't buy guns. This work, though. Frying doughnuts." He looks at me, almost in disbelief. "Frying doughnuts. Some career move, for a college grad, eh?"

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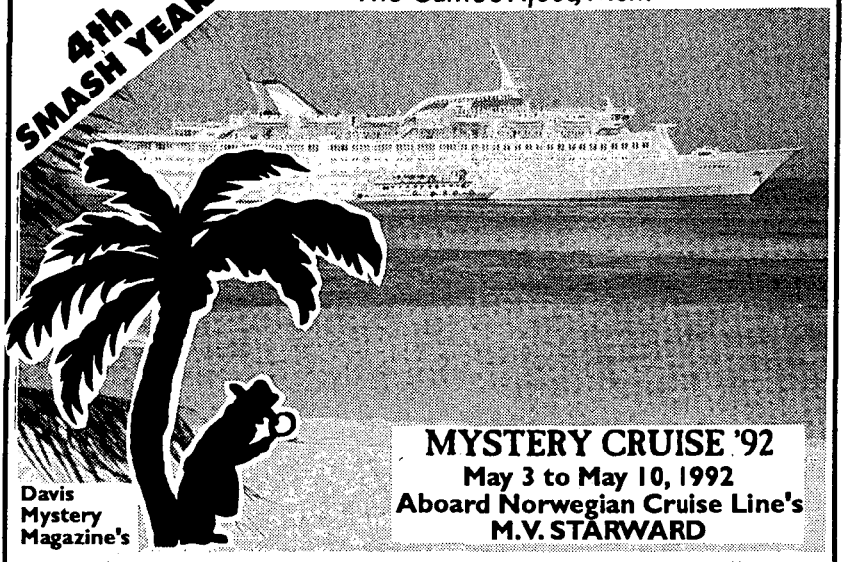
"The Game's Afoot, Mon!"



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I look around the room and see two brown insects move against the greasy wall. I try to think of what to say and I remember old arguments, and I try again.

"You don't have to stay here, you know," I say.

He rests a chin in his hand.

"Oh, yes, I do," he says. "Yes, I do."

That evening I'm in bed, resting, one arm across my forehead. I'm covered by a flowered sheet, and I remember what my brother said earlier, about remembering clean sheets. On the far walnut counter a candle flickers and sputters, and from the open bathroom door I hear the shower slowly being turned off. No matter the time, no matter how long and wonderfully it goes on, Denise always takes a shower afterwards. I try not to think, and I find it very hard.

My hands feel cold and clumsy. Next to me, less than a foot away, is a nightstand with a darkened lamp, and in that nightstand is an unread Bible and the 9 mm Beretta. I look about the room, feeling out of place, out of sorts.

Denise comes out wearing a light pink robe, toweling down her hair. She sits at the edge of the bed and leans towards me, as if wanting to be touched or caressed, and I lie still.

She says, "So. How's he doing, his first week out?"

"He's alive."

She has a look that's almost a sneer, and it saddens me. "That's an accomplishment?"

I close my eyes, remembering. "For my brother James it is. He's kept himself alive through a lot. When he was in college, he was in army ROTC, and he wanted to be a helicopter pilot and go to Vietnam in the worst way. Think of that, and the survival rates of pilots back then, and what his odds of survival were. But a couple of weeks before he was due to report, he was in a bad car accident. Almost got killed and ruined his right arm. The army wouldn't have him. And while in the hospital he was depressed and got hooked on pain medication. That monkey rode his back for a long time and rode him into prison. I'm pretty sure he's off of everything now, but I don't think it makes much of a difference to him. He's a stubborn man. He sees himself as a con, no matter the circumstances, no matter what's ahead."

"So he's alive," my wife sniffs. "Some life."

Waiting for a moment for a touch that never comes, she gets up

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and goes into the bathroom without looking back, and I roll over on my side and wonder why my hands are so cold.

And I remember:

Fourteen years old, with a brother that was bigger and better and a guy I could depend on. A guy who would give you a better description of the mysteries of women than Mother or Father. A guy who would buy you beer for those warm summer nights when you camped out in the back yard with your buddies. And one who was always there to listen, to advise, to argue.

In his bedroom, me sitting on his bed, looking over at him as he gets dressed in his ROTC uniform. His hair is full and dark and he is clean-shaven, and his blue eyes glitter as if smiling continuously at everything about him, finding humor there. He tugs at the uniform, looking slightly self-consciously in the closet mirror. He has a small pudginess around his waist that exercises and diets refuse to melt away.

On one wall of the bedroom is a poster of John Wayne, from his Green Berets movie. The war in Vietnam has been lost for some time, I know, but my brother doesn't care. ROTC has paid for his college, and he wants to be a helicopter pilot, and he wants to go overseas. Mother and Father are unsure of it all, at one moment being fiercely proud of him and passing around wallet-sized photos of James in his uniform, and in other moments, sitting quietly out in the back yard, holding hands, the smoke from Father's cigarette eddying up slowly from his other hand.

I have no doubt. I watch the evening news, of the body counts and the atrocities, of the villages destroyed and the protests in the streets. I clip out photographs from *Newsweek* and *Time* and *Life,* and every time I see a photo of a burnt and crashed Huey helicopter, my heart seems to slow down and ooze away.

He turns and smiles. "Pretty sharp, right? Amanda thinks so, and let me tell you, little brother, there are still some women out there that get turned on by a man in uniform."

In a month he will graduate from college. And some months after that, he will be going thousands of miles away to a strange land, and I know, and I hear the whispers that tell me that he will be killed this summer. I don't want to lose him, and I can't say this to him, and afraid of crying, I only smile and nod fiercely.

I sit in my office at the dealership, the door shut, just looking

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out the window. It's a sunny day and a stiff wind is flapping the pennants and banners strung up across the building and light posts. People are moving through the rows and rows of cars. The customers are the ones who move slowly, going from car to car, deep in thought, whispering at each other, nodding or shaking their heads. My salesmen and saleswomen are the confident ones, the ones who move quickly and to the point, or who rest against a polished fender, smiling and just waiting.

Cars. To everyone out there those are wonderful vehicles, the latest from Detroit or Japan, shiny and ready to fulfill everyone's dream, everyone's fantasy.

To me, they are just hunks of iron, and my job is to get them off the lot as fast as possible. The more iron that rests and rusts there, the more money it costs me.

Cars. I feel sorry for the kids now who were like me in high school, not too bright when it came to math or English but who knew how to change a car's oil when they were twelve and who could do a tuneup when they were fourteen. Cars in my youth were simpler and had hardly changed much from Father's time. But now they have all this electronic gadgetry and computer diagnosis crap, well, you almost need a college education to work on a car these days.

I lift my feet up against the low windowsill, admiring my two hundred dollar Italian shoes. How our parents would shake their heads at that expense, and how they would shake their heads at the novelty of it all, of me doing well, and of James going sour. Back then it was, Owen, look up to James. James is going places. James has gone to college and has a service career ahead of him. And what about you? Going to change spark plugs for the rest of your life?

On my walls are my trophies and certificates and photos of triumph. Chamber of Commerce awards. Recognition for cash volume and car sales. And one photo, taken at some political function where I shook this senator's hand, and a year later he was elected president. I look at them and they seem covered with dust, as if they didn't belong to me, and had never belonged. I feel like I am an impostor, sitting in someone's office, and that in a moment I'll be discovered and tossed out into the parking lot.

The sun reflecting on the cars outside is very bright, and makes my head ache, and for a moment I think if I had my pistol right here, right now, I'd shoot out every goddamn windshield.

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I clasp my hands together and wait.

Another memory:

In the courtyard the grass is scuffed and brown and the stiff plastic badge clipped to my jacket flips back and forth in the breeze. I sit down at one of the dirty concrete tables in the yard and look around me, at the groups of men working out among clanging and heavy weights, at the others playing basketball with shouts and expressions that make no sense to me, and the other men, hunched over and walking alone, staring at the yellow grass, their fists clenched inside their pants pockets. Those were the ones who scared me the most.

From one group he approaches, nodding a bit, his gait sure and cocky, as if he was there not because of some offense or penalty but because he wanted to prove to anyone who cared that he had what it took to make it in such a world, where every man was an enemy, every corner a potential ambush. His black hair is combed straight back and his skin is pasty white. His right arm hangs stiffly at one side, and he wears light denim pants and shirt.

He sits down across from me, saying, "Dutiful Owen. If Mother and Father were still alive, they'd be proud of you."

I try to smile and fail, since it seems impossible to smile inside such a place, with the glistening coils of razor wire about the yard, and the uniformed deputies who walk two abreast, their heads and eyes constantly moving around. From an inside pocket I take out four packs of Marlboros which I slip across the table to him. They have been opened and examined not more than five minutes ago, and James nods and tucks the packs into his shirt pockets.

"Thanks for the cash," he says, wrinkling his old eyes at me. "It'll help a lot. There's a scam going on, you see, where I was getting squeezed to do some servicing for these Nazi types, over on the east wing. Water boys. That's what they call 'em, but you do more than just errands. You sit there and you do. So. A couple a packs a week to these other boys, and I've got my protection. A little weight on my side and they don't bother me."

James moves his right arm. "Arm like this makes me very attractive." He pats his shirt pockets, as if afraid the cigarettes are already gone. "You seem all right, Owen. You doing all right?"

"I'm doing okay." I look around at the wires and the muttering men, walking by at such a slow pace, and I say, "What does your lawyer think?"

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"My lawyer?" He rubs at his jaw with his left hand. "My lawyer spends most of his time telling me how stupid I am."

"Do you think he has a point?"

James smiles. "Getting testy, younger one?"

"James, you knew you were violating parole the minute you got the gun."

He shrugs. "And robbing the store was extra, as was taking the shot at the clerk. So what."

I stare over his shoulder, at the concrete buildings. "Why?"

"Why?" James asks. "You mean, why am I here, or why did I take a shot at the clerk? The answer's connected, you know. I'm here because of the clerk, and I shot at the clerk because I didn't want to come back here."

"If money was—"

"Yeah," he interrupts. "A problem, always a problem, but what I need you can't provide. A feeling of doing something on my own, something I know I can do. And no matter how successful you are or how many cars you sell, Owen, and what you might want to plan for me, that's something I have to do by myself. And stealing things is what I'm good at. I was out of that store, a good haul, I could feel the weight in the bag, and I saw the clerk go up to the alarm. Right there in a second, I saw it all, him doing that and the cops coming and me back here, wondering who's going to try to make me his new boyfriend. So I took a shot at him. He should have stayed on the floor."

"He's still in the hospital."

James grunts. "He should have stayed on the floor. He made his choice."

Choices, I think.

It's a warm night. I park across the street from the doughnut shop in a red BMW I had borrowed that day from my lot, having left my blue one behind. I don't want to be made. Even so I am still uncomfortable, as if expecting some police officer to charge me with stealing this car. I park so I can see the kitchen area, where the doors are open to allow some breezes in. I can make out James, working stolidly and silently, his arms pasty white, up to the elbows in flour. His hair looks odd, and I figure he's wearing a hairnet. He moves slowly, wearing black shoes, white pants, and a white shirt that seems to strain from the weight of his belly.

I watch for long minutes, resting my head on my cold left hand.

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James's life has always revolved around uniforms. His whole life, his whole progression: the blue uniform of the Cub Scouts, the khaki of the Boy Scouts, the dark green of ROTC, the light green of the hospital clothes, the denim of the prisons, and now the clear white of his doughnut shop.

For so long I prayed to God not to let James die. And after that last whole summer of his, at the time of his accident, was when I stopped going to church.

And it was then, that night:

James was to report to the army in two weeks, and every day, the news from Vietnam seemed to get worse and worse. The television images play themselves in my mind again, over and over. Soldiers in rice paddies. Villages being burned. And the *slap-slap* sound of the helicopters, scurrying above the smoke and the bullets and noise like giant locusts, and the twisted and black and green wreckage of the helicopters whenever they crashed.

I lie awake in bed, waiting. James is out, visiting some friends, and when he left he was singing some army song, going out to his '68 Chevy Impala, parked in the darkened back yard. My room is right across from his, and many times he would come in to see me. The Christmas Eve night, years ago, when he deftly shook a burned-out lightbulb and told me that the light and airy tinkling sound was Santa's sleigh, coming to our house. A summer evening when he sat on the edge of my bed and told me stories of the times he had struck out in Little League. And the cold winter mornings when he would come in and pull off the blankets, and get me up for school.

From downstairs the phone rings, its noise shrill and loud. I lie there, still, my fists clenched. I hear Father answer and make a low shout, and then Mother starts sobbing. I roll off the bed and put my head next to the heat register, and that's when I learn of James's accident.

A month or two later. I visit James in his hospital room, and his right arm is still hanging above him, held up by plaster and wires and pulleys. His hair is quite long, and he is growing a mustache. I go into the sour-smelling room and James is sitting up, and sitting by him is a guy about his age, and I feel myself clench up. Hippie. Long hair, odd-colored T-shirt, patched jeans, and sandals. He has a thick and wiry beard and is wearing round glasses, and

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I don't know why this man is here. James is loud in a lot of ways, and he has always been loud in his dislike of the hippies.

I look at James and feel scared. His eyes are funny, swollen and small at the same time, and they are rolling around some, like they can't focus.

"Owen," he says, his voice slurring. "Meet my new buddy George. Ol' George here is my own private pharmacist. Man, the pain here gets so bad only George can help."

I say, "Your arm still hurts?"

George giggles and James looks over at me again, and I know I will only stay for a few seconds more.

"Who said anything about my arm?" James asks.

In my rear yard Denise sits on the grass while I rest in a redwood lounge chair. She leans her head against my thigh. She wears acid-washed designer jeans and one of my Oxford shirts, the sleeves rolled up to expose her tanned arms. She is barefoot and holds a drink in her hands. Tonight I'm wearing my own suburban uniform: light blue polo shirt and tan shorts. I look at her and the yard and the house behind us, filled with expensive gadgetry, and I think, iron. Iron got me all of this. Years before, I had hired the woman who became my wife as a bookkeeper at one of my dealerships. Now she is an independent accounting consultant, and I think she is mine. But I'm not sure. I don't feel like I belong. I don't feel that either she or the house is mine, but I do feel like a trespasser.

She flexes her toes in the grass and says, "Your brother?"

"He's staying alive," I say, wondering about the lie I just uttered. I've had too many drinks myself, and it's a struggle to keep still in the chair.

Denise looks into her glass and says, "You ever feel vindicated, Owen?"

"What do you mean?"

She stretches one foot out.

"I think you would," she says. "After all, from what you told me, growing up wasn't that great for you. Your older brother was always held up as an example of success, and your parents always gave you a hard time about school and what you wanted from life. Right? They were sure that James was going to have a wonderful career in the army and that you were going to be a gas jockey. But it didn't quite work out that way, did it? Then again, nothing ever

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does. Your older brother gets into a bad car accident, turns into a junkie and a criminal, and you become a pretty damn good businessman."

A robin prances along the lawn, cocking its head back and forth, back and forth.

I say, "You know, Mother could never bring herself to say what you just did, about James. She would only say that James was in his own dark night, and that one day things would get light for him. I tried to believe that, as much as I looked up to him."

The robin snaps forward and rears back, a worm squirming in its harsh beak. It flies off and I turn my head, trying to see where it goes.

"You said you looked up to James. Weren't you ever jealous of all the attention he got?"

"No, never," I say, not quite looking at her.

She asks, "How did that car accident happen, Owen?"

"Went off the road and into a tree," I say. "No one knows why."

She sighs and in a bit rubs her lips against my leg, and gently nibbles at the skin there, and I am too ashamed to respond, being the liar that I am.

I visit him once again, and he is resting on his sagging bed, slightly drunk. His white clothes from the doughnut shop are stained and crusty, and there is a sickly-sweet smell that I can taste in my mouth. His feet are bare and dirty, and I notice that his little toe on his left foot has been cut off. I wonder what awful thing happened to have caused that.

"It's like this, Owen," he says, and his voice is unsteady. "Suppose the car accident never happened. Or suppose it was just a little one, not enough to keep me out of the army. Man, it would have been something else. I knew I had the talent, knew I could fly helicopters, Owen. Sure, it was dangerous, but I knew I could make it. And when it was over I'd either stay with the army or become one of those corporate pilots, fly a helicopter anywhere in the world. Man, that would have been something. Money. Women. Travel. Keep myself slim and in good shape. But my damn luck . . . And even if I bought it in Vietnam, Owen, it would have been better than this crap. If I could trade my name and put it on that wall in Washington and take it off all of those police and parole reports, I'd do it in a second."

I don't know what to say. He closes his eyes. I take out my wallet

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and remove two twenty dollar bills, and I stuff them in his pants pocket, hoping that he won't remember how he got them in the morning.

At night I wake up and sit against the bed. Denise sighs and stirs against me, and murmurs, "You awake?"

"Yes," I say, looking out the fine bedroom windows of what is supposedly my house to the well-groomed yard. "Yes, I am. Thinking of James."

She moves against me and she is too warm, making me feel nervous, like I don't belong. "That's all you've been thinking about, the past couple of weeks."

Denise yawns and rolls over. Her naked back is tan and smooth in the light from the rising moon.

She says, "Don't hate me for this, Owen, but I wish he was back in prison. At least you could sleep at night."

I think of what she says for a long time.

It didn't take much and yet I'm here, in the stinking room that belongs to James, thinking, thinking of what might have been. If the car accident had never happened, and everything he had planned, had dreamed and worked for, had come true.

So. My brother's room, which is empty. A half hour ago Denise had called me at the dealership, saying that someone had broken into our house, breaking through the rear door's lock. The police told my wife that it had been a professional job, and they thought it was a professional, save for one puzzling fact. Nothing had been taken from the house, except for one thing.

Of course. My 9 mm Beretta.

The night air is hot and seems to seize my chest, and I look out the tiny window and out at the lights of the city.

Choices.

Tonight my brother has made his choice, one he has continued to make ever since that day I saw him in the hospital, his eyes glittering at all that was around him. Tonight, with weapon in hand, he was roaming out there, looking for cash, of course, but looking for something he could call his own, something he has never grasped before. And I get very small consolation that in this instance he has chosen to take something from me, even though I had never offered it.

Choices.

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I breathe deeply, wishing for one horrible moment that some carcinogen in the air would strike me down at this instant. And here I am, waiting, wondering if I will ever talk to him again, wondering about the cops out there who might catch him, who might not make him live, and for a moment I think of going to the police, giving them his description, plead with them to pick him up, for violating his parole means he'll go back to prison, but at least he'll live.

I shake my head. It would be no use, whatever I did with James. I learned that so many years ago, the night I went out to the dark night and disabled the brakes on his car, the night of his accident.

I wanted him to live. I wanted him to be hurt, not badly, just enough so he would stay home that summer.

So he would live.

And, of course, everything I had touched had become a failure, for my brother is dead, has been for years, and I had killed him.

I wonder about his dying tonight. I wonder if I will ever tell him.

I wait. And I hear steps approaching. The door opens. And:

James stands there, a half-smile on his face, carrying a paper bag under one arm. He is wearing jeans and a creased brown leather jacket. His hair is down his back in a greasy ponytail. And I stare at him for so long that I can no longer smell the decay in the room.

"Surprised?" he says as he closes the door behind him.

I can't think of what to say for what seems hours, until I say, "No. Just disappointed, James."

He smiles again, and drops the bag. It makes a solid noise when it lands on the table, and there's a slight metallic sound and I know where my Beretta is.

"Disappointment. Very original."

I take a deep breath and say, "James, you've had a lot of opportunities, a lot of times along the way when you could have done something different. A lot of opportunities."

"Maybe I don't want them."

"For Christ's sake, why?" and I hear my voice rise.

"Maybe I have my own reasons. My own little joys of life. Maybe I enjoy seeing my little professional brother get so uptight and bothered. Maybe I like that."

I try to think, then, of how he looked before the accident, the slightly overweight but determined brother who was going to go far in his life, and all I see is this creature before me. I wonder

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how it's possible that we come from the same parents.

"Maybe I should leave," I say.

"Maybe you should," he agrees. I go past him and open the door and I say, "So. How long do you intend to keep on doing this?"

He shrugs. "Until I get caught. Or blown away. Or score so well I can stop."

"Some profession," I say. I go through the open door and stand in the hallway and look back at him.

He smiles again, a disturbing look. "A profession you should be familiar with, little brother. We're both thieves. I'm just more current in my thievery. What you stole, you stole about twenty years ago. From me."

At that, he slowly closes the door in my face.

I close my eyes. Take a deep shuddering breath. Open them and look at the greasy door and the trash-cluttered hallway, and I listen to the murmurs and shouts and the distant wail of sirens, and I smell the ever present scent of things gone terribly wrong, and out of everything I feel, I feel like I finally belong.

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FICTION

The Death Angels

by Pete Hautman

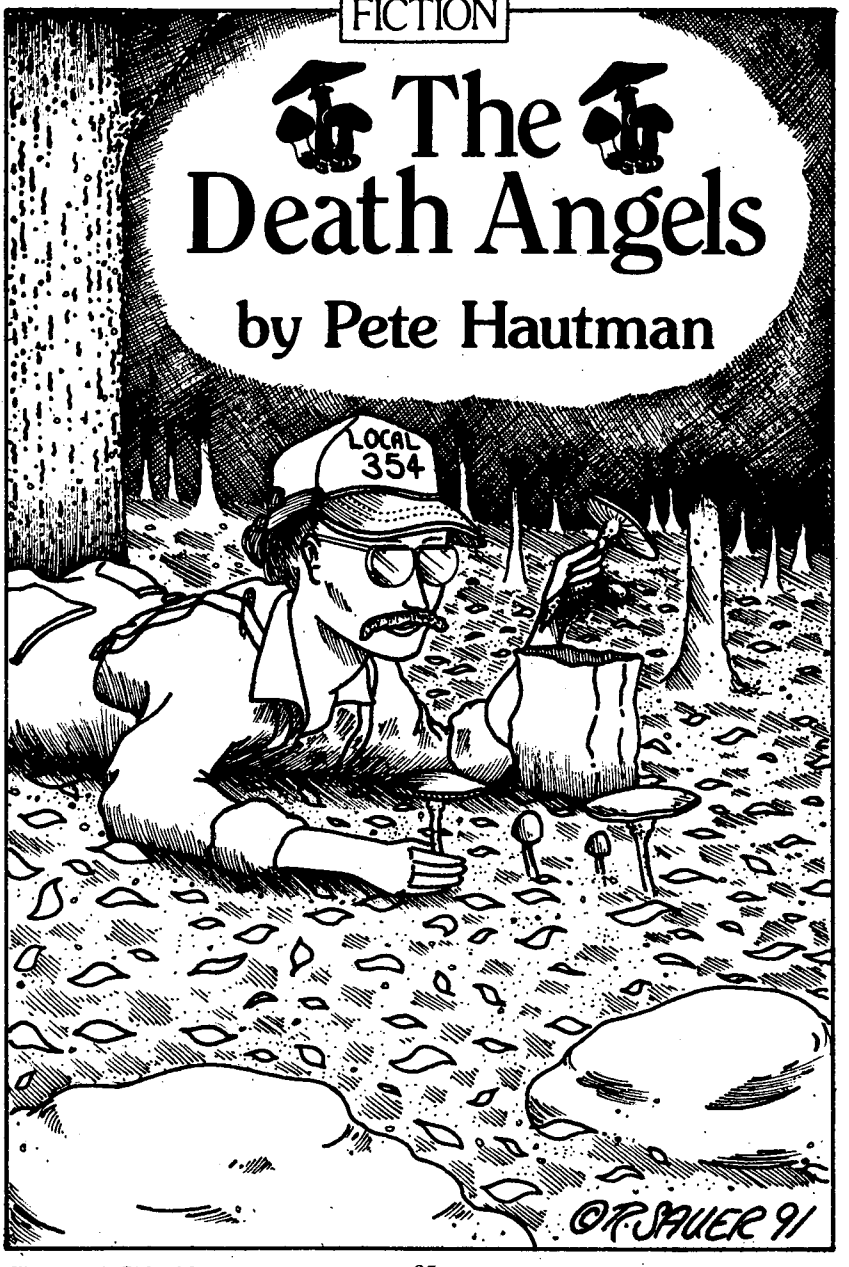

Illustration by Richard Sauer

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One Monday evening in July, little Marlys Hammer got the idea to murder her unemployed two hundred eighty-three pound Dorito-eating husband, Scott.

Actually, it was Scott himself who gave her the idea. Ideas were not something Marlys was accustomed to generating on her own.

She got home from her job at the phone company that afternoon with no plans beyond making a tuna hot dish for supper. She parked her Ford Escort in the driveway of their two bedroom rambler, trying to remember whether they were out of mushroom soup, the universal hot dish binder, when she noticed that the grass in their front yard was still six inches high and going to seed. The fact that Scott had once again failed to mow the lawn did not inspire Marlys to murder, but it did help to create a receptive state of mind.

Unfriendly letters from the Montgomery Ward Credit Department, Valley National Bank, and Dr. Himmelman, their dentist, had appeared in their mailbox. Also, another bill from the CD of the Month Club. Scott had joined the CD club a few months earlier, and they now boasted a collection of twelve compact disks, none of which were they able to listen to, since they could not afford a CD player. Scott insisted he was going to buy one, a JVC with remote control, as soon as he found a job, but it had been eight months now and Marlys despaired of his ever bringing home a paycheck.

She found him, still in his red flannel pajamas at five thirty in the afternoon, asleep on the sofa in front of the television, snoring while Mr. Rogers told him he was a good boy. Five empty Budweiser cans decorated the back of the beige corduroy sofa, and an empty nacho-flavored Doritos bag lay on its side on the floor beside an empty bean dip can. Scott had been gaining an average of one point six pounds a week for the past year on this simple diet.

Marlys's mouth, a horizontal line two and one-half inches wide, shortened. She turned off Mr. Rogers, who was about to change into his sport coat and leave anyway. The thing on the couch twitched its sandy mustache and snorted. Marlys shook her head, her most expressive and often used gesture, and walked quickly into the kitchen, where she prepared their evening meal, that large tuna hot dish, of which her husband the eating machine would consume eighty percent. She waited until the meal was on the table and

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ready to eat before waking him.

"So," she said, watching him shovel in the tuna and noodles, "did you apply for any jobs today?"

Scott Hammer looked at his wife and tried to read her expression. As always, he failed. Her eyes were occluded by a pair of thick rimless glasses which she never removed except in bed; he was not entirely sure about the color of her eyes. Eight years of looking into that little round face and the only thing he had ever seen change was the length of her mouth. Right now it was very short.

Scott looked down at his pajama-clad bulk. "Do I look like I've been applying for jobs? There's no point in applying for carpentry jobs if there's nothing being built, is there? I suppose you want me to go flip burgers at McDonald's or something. I'm a carpenter, f'chrissake. You wanna be married to a burger flipper?"

Marlys stared back at him, speared an egg noodle, and ate it daintily. Scott wondered how she was able to eat without opening her mouth. "So what did you do today?" she asked.

Scott tipped back his can of beer and thought about that. "I watched Geraldo Rivera," he said. "He had this show about people who got away with murder. All these people who killed somebody and then got off on a technicality. They had one guy on who killed his mother for insurance money and was acquitted and got all this money and he's on TV telling Geraldo, 'Yeah, man, I did it. I killed her.' I mean, do you believe it?"

Scott was just warming to the subject when he noticed his wife was looking off into space, paying him no attention whatsoever. He shrugged and served himself a second plateful of tuna and noodles.

Actually, Marlys thought, the idea came from Geraldo Rivera. Scott had only reported it, brought it to her attention. She liked the idea of murdering her husband. It would be nice to have the money from his life insurance policy, and it would be fun to be a widow and a murderess. After dinner, Scott returned to the couch. Marlys went to the shelf where they kept the World Book encyclopedias. When Marlys wanted to know more about a subject, she always turned first to the World Book. There was very little worth knowing that was not included in those green and white volumes. She selected the *M* volume and looked for an entry under "Murder." Never having committed a murder before, she was hoping to find a

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listing of the usual methods. Sort of a catalogue of techniques from which she could choose. It would give her a jumping off point.

To her disappointment, the World Book lacked useful instruction. She did, however, notice a large color plate on the next page, a picture of a white mushroom. The copy under the photo stated that it was *Amanita virosa,* the Death Angel. Marlys stared at the picture for a full minute, then sat down on the floor and read the article about "Mushrooms and Toadstools."

As always, the World Book provided the solution to her problem.

The following evening Marlys made a pot of mushroom soup from a clump of white toadstools she found in the back yard. She hummed to herself while she was slicing the toadstools, thinking how her life would be without Scott permanently camped on the sofa eating his way through their food budget and giving her Ginsu knives for her birthday.

She did not serve the soup with dinner, but rather left it in the refrigerator where Scott would find it. It pleased her, the thought that while she was hard at work for the phone company, Scott, too lazy to cook for himself, would reheat and eat whatever she left there. It was like he was doing it to himself.

When she came home from work the next day, she found him, still wearing his red pajamas, draped over the sofa. Mr. Rogers was singing a song, but Scott Hammer was not listening. His eyes were closed, his mouth was hanging wide open, and his right hand was resting on the floor. He looked like he was only sleeping. Marlys's heart was going wild in her chest, and her lips were slightly parted. She set her purse down and approached him slowly. She reached out and put her hand on his neck to feel for a pulse. His skin was still warm.

Scott Hammer sat up and said, "What the hell?"

Marlys screamed and jumped back.

"What's the matter? What's wrong?" shouted Scott, leaping to his feet and swiveling his head back and forth.

Marlys staggered back and shook her head. "Nothing," she gasped. "You scared me."

Scott looked at her, blinking sleepily. "I scared you? I was asleep. How can I scare you if I'm asleep?"

"It's all right," she said, stepping backward out of the room. "Never mind." He must not

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have eaten the soup, she thought.

Scott shook his head and blew out his cheeks, then picked up the remote control and turned the television channel to a rerun of *M*A*S*H*.

Marlys went to the refrigerator and opened the door. The soup pot was gone. She looked at the sink and saw the pot there, empty but, typically, unwashed. She went back to the den.

"How was the soup?" she asked.

"I ate it, didn't I?"

So, she had picked the wrong toadstools.

"Good," she said after a moment. "I'll make it again sometime."

At three o'clock that morning Marlys awakened, her nightgown sodden with cold sweat. What had she done? Good God! What if he had eaten the mushrooms and died? She could have gone to prison and never collected a dime of his life insurance policy. They would have done an autopsy and found the poisonous toadstools—if they had been poisonous toadstools—in his stomach. They would have known that she had killed him. How stupid could she be? She must have been out of her mind.

The next time she would plan more carefully.

She listened to Scott snoring as she constructed her strategy. At five forty in the morning she smiled. It was a truly beautiful plan. She closed her eyes and dreamed of coming home to a vacant sofa. She dreamed of paying off all the bills, going to Dr. Himmelman, and giving him a check for her root canal.

Two weeks later Scott Hammer was sitting at the kitchen table in his green rayon pajama bottoms working the crossword puzzle when the doorbell rang. He stood up and looked frantically around for the top to his pajamas, remembered that he had just thrown it down the clothes chute, and stamped his foot angrily. He did not like answering the door with his chest and belly showing. The doorbell rang again.

"The hell with it," he said. He walked to the front door and jerked it open.

It was the postman, Rick. "This was too big to fit through your slot," he said, handing a cardboard package to Scott. Scott thanked him and closed the door. What could it be? The box was about three inches thick, twelve inches tall, and ten inches wide. Like a large book. It was addressed to Mr. Scott Hammer. A present? He could think of no one who would send him a present. He set the package on the kitchen

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table and opened it with a Ginsu knife.

It was a book. He turned it over. *A Field Guide to North American Mushrooms.* What the hell? He read the attached letter.

Dear Mr. Hammer:

Congratulations!

Your decision to join The Natural History Book Club shows you to be an intelligent, aware individual who is curious and eager to learn about the world in which he lives. The Natural History Book Club was created by and for people just like you!

You will find in this package your FREE selection. We hope you will . . .

What the hell? He didn't remember any Natural History Book Club. What would he want with a mushroom book? I'll send it back, he thought. Send it back right away before Marlys sees it. She would think he'd joined another expensive club, like the CD club he'd signed up for. Marlys had not liked that, her point being that they did not have a CD player. He put the book into the box, then paused and looked at the letter again, his eyes locking on the words "*. . . your FREE selection.*"

Well, he thought, if it's free, there's not much point in returning it. Besides, he couldn't let Marlys run his life. Ever since they had that fight about the CD club he had been thinking about just up and leaving her. He would walk out of her life, and then where would she be? Where would she ever find another man willing to put up with her little round head? The hell with her, he decided. He set the mushroom book on the end table by the sofa where she would be sure to see it, threw away the box and the letter, and retired to the sofa to check out Oprah Winfrey.

Somewhat to his surprise, Marlys never said a word about the *Field Guide to North American Mushrooms.*

"That Scott, God love him, do you know what he's doing now? He's got himself a book about mushrooms, and he's out picking toadstools and eating them! I really worry, you know, some of the things he brings home . . ." Marlys shook her head and sipped her decaffeinated coffee.

Freida Thatcher pushed the last bit of doughnut between her plump lips and licked her fingers. "At least he's out doing something," she said. "Instead of just lying around in his pajamas all day."

Marlys nodded. "That's true.

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But how he got on this mushroom kick I'll never know. I'm scared to death he's gonna poison himself and me both. Truth is, I don't eat most of what he brings home."

"I don't blame you, dear. I don't blame you one bit." She looked at her watch. "We better be getting back. It's five to one."

Marlys smiled at her friend and coworker. On the way back to her desk she stopped and chatted with Greg Wilson in the marketing department. When Greg asked her how things were going at home, she said, "Oh, that Scott. He's joined another book club."

"Another one?" Greg exclaimed. Marlys had spoken often of her husband's spendthrift ways.

"Yes, a nature book club. Now he's become the great white mushroom hunter." She giggled. "He has this book about mushrooms and thinks he's an expert. I'm afraid he's going to pick the wrong mushroom someday and . . ."

"That's a dangerous hobby," Greg said.

"You aren't a-kiddin'," said Marlys.

The subject of Scott Hammer's mushroom obsession arose in nearly every conversation Marlys had over the next week. Her coworkers, her hairdresser, the cashier in the grocery store, and the cop who gave her a speeding ticket all heard about her husband's dangerous hobby.

On Friday evening, on the way home from work, Marlys stopped at Tinker's Magic and Costume Shoppe and bought a tube of spirit gum and a mustache that looked very much like her husband's.

Arriving home, she found Scott draped over the sofa, wearing his green pajamas, watching Mr. Rogers with his eyes closed. The *Field Guide to North American Mushrooms* was parked on the end table where it had rested untouched since the day it arrived. She picked up the book and took it into the bedroom, where she studied the pictures and field characteristics of several mushrooms in the *Amanita* family. She was particularly attracted to the *Amanita virosa,* the Death Angel, which was, according to the text, a common and widely distributed mushroom responsible for the majority of accidental poisonous mushroom fatalities.

On Saturday morning Marlys Hammer crashed through the brush in an overgrown area of Baker Park Preserve cursing her husband, her bad luck, and the author of the *Field Guide to*

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North American Mushrooms.

"Widely distributed," she muttered through her fake mustache. "Frequent and common under hardwoods, indeed!" She was quoting from the *Field Guide.* "Sure!" She stumbled over a root and fell face forward into a patch of vegetation that she hoped was not poison ivy. Brushing away the twigs and dirt, she leaned against a tree and took a minute to feel sorry for herself.

She was hot, she itched from a dozen mosquito bites, and she had not found a single amanita virosa. She was wearing a pair of Scott's overalls, rolled up at the ankles and pinned at the shoulders. They weighed a ton. Her hair was tucked up into his Local 354 baseball cap, and she had pasted the mustache to her upper lip with spirit gum. She felt only slightly less ridiculous than she looked. She had been stumbling through the wooded areas of Baker Park Preserve since seven o'clock that morning looking for mushrooms, and had found more than a dozen different types. The problem was, none of them would kill you.

Wiping her brow with the back of her hand, Marlys pushed away from the tree and continued her search. An hour later, when she was about to give it up and just go home and shoot the son of a bitch, she spotted a flash of white through the trees and moved toward it.

That same afternoon the television that had been draining Scott Hammer's brain for so many months coughed, sputtered, and died midway through the Yankees versus the Twins. Scott's eyes snapped open, and his tongue crawled out of his mouth and moistened his lips. He sat there for some time before pushing his body up into a standing position and walking to the refrigerator for a beer. The beer would help him focus his thoughts. He wondered vaguely where Marlys was. It was Saturday and she was not ragging at him to mow the lawn or clean the gutters or something. Strange. He opened the refrigerator and discovered it to be beerless.

The situation had grown serious. After a while he closed the refrigerator door and went to the bedroom to change out of his pajamas. He found a pair of bluejeans that were not too tight if he left the top button open. None of his clothes seemed to fit him comfortably any more, which was why he preferred, if at all possible, to remain in his pajamas. He found a shirt that was made out of some stretchy material, put

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it on, and let the shirttail hang out over the open button. He could not find his Local 354 cap, but he did find a twenty dollar bill folded into a sock in Marlys's top dresser drawer.

The Sunshine Inn, a 3.2 beer joint with a big screen TV and great cheeseburgers, was doing a brisk Saturday afternoon business. A lot of the guys came to watch the game, but most of them were there because that was where they went on Saturday afternoons. Scott found a place at the bar where he could see the game and ordered a Miller and a cheeseburger. The beer went down smooth and fast after the six block walk in the hot sunshine; he ordered another and watched the Twins floundering through the second half of the eighth inning at Yankee Stadium while Denny fried up his burger on the big black grill.

The cheeseburger was a real taste sensation after weeks of Marlys's soups and casseroles. Scott was chewing it, rolling it around in his mouth, when Hank Wollet clapped him on the shoulder and asked him whether that was a mushroom burger he was eating. Scott swallowed and said, "What?"

"Mushroom burger," Hank repeated. He was grinning in a way that Scott did not like. Hank was a real jerk, always grinning like he had something on you.

"It's a cheeseburger," said Scott, looking at his burger.

"I heard you were on this mushroom kick," Hank said. "I heard you were eating toadstools three meals a day."

Scott shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Marlys told Sally that you joined this mushroom club."

Scott thought about that, then remembered the mushroom book he had received in the mail. So, Marlys had noticed the book after all. And now she was telling everybody he was a mushroom expert. He took another bite of cheeseburger, ignoring Hank, who was still hanging over him. Well, if she wanted to think he was some kind of mushroom nut, he really did not care. In fact, he realized, he did not care about anything Marlys thought or said. The cheeseburger filled his mouth with rich, salty flavor that was worlds away from Marlys's aseptic concoctions. He decided to eat more of his meals at the Sunshine Inn.

What would it be like if she just disappeared, he wondered suddenly, pushing the last bite of burger into his mouth. He tried to imagine it. What if he were to walk home and the house was empty and Marlys

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was gone? What if she was run over by a bus, or hit by a window that fell out of one of those skyscrapers. Or got mugged and killed. He thought about Geraldo Rivera, sipped his beer, thought about their life insurance policies, and imagined all the ways that Marlys might die. His favorite, the one he imagined most vividly, was the one where she was yelling at him, screaming at him, stamping her little feet and pointing her little finger at him when a meteorite the size of a baseball came crashing through the roof and bopped her dead on the head.

"Ka-pow!" he said.

Denny looked up from the grill. "What's that? You want another beer?"

"Yeah," Scott said. "And another cheeseburger, too."

Marlys threw the mustache over the railing and watched it flutter down to the surface of the river where it floated momentarily before sinking from sight. She had changed back into her own drab clothing; Scott's overalls were now folded and stowed in the trunk, his Local 354 cap beside them. She did not think anyone had noticed her picking the mushrooms, but if they had, they would have identified her as a mustached man with a baseball cap. Marlys climbed back into the car and continued on her way home.

The mushrooms, six handsome white specimens ranging from four to seven inches tall, rested beside her in a Dunkin' Donuts bag. As she drove, she caressed the bag with her right hand. They were beautiful mushrooms. She had discovered the fairy ring in a small grassy clearing, the white caps of the mushrooms brilliant in the sunlight. It had been like coming upon the treasure at the end of a rainbow.

To her surprise, Scott was not attached to the sofa when she arrived. Taking advantage of his absence, Marlys brought the mushrooms in from the garage and arranged them on the countertop. They were perfect specimens. Each of them had the pure white gills, the veil-like ring midway up the stalk, and the distinctive white basal cup—the death cup—that identified them as true amanitas. She washed them carefully, gently dislodging bits of forest mold from the base, and laid them out side by side on a dishtowel to dry. Now, she thought, what shall I make? Shall I make a pot of Soup du Morte? Or perhaps the house specialty, Death Angel Delight.

It occurred to her then to

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check the mushroom book one last time. To make absolutely certain that these were truly *Amanita virosa*. She was sitting on the sofa, something she was able to do rarely, turning through the *Field Guide to North American Mushrooms* when she heard the back door bang open. She quickly replaced the book on the end table and rushed to the kitchen, where she found her husband staring down at her six white and deadly beauties.

"Scott," she said, her heart hammering in her rib cage. "Where have you been?" Did her voice sound strange to him? It did to her.

Scott looked up at her and she could see the Sunshine Inn reflected in his pink eyes.

"Out," he said. The sour tang of beer drifted toward her. He pointed at the mushrooms on the counter. "What the hell kind of mushrooms are these?"

"Those?" Marlys looked at them as though she had never seen them before. What was she going to do? Calm down, she told herself, you haven't done anything yet. "Uh, oh! The mushrooms! I, uh, I found them in the yard!"

"You don't expect me to eat them, I hope." He poked at the nearest one with a thick forefinger.

"Oh, no . . . I just saw them and thought you might be interested. I saw you had that book about mushrooms . . ."

Scott blinked. Book? He remembered then, the book that had come in the mail. He also remembered something else, someone he had talked to who said he was interested in mushrooms. This was very confusing. He picked up a mushroom and examined it.

"I was thinking you could maybe identify them," Marlys said, thinking that if she suggested it he would never do it.

"Identify . . . ?" Scott held the mushroom up to the light. It was pure translucent white. The crumb of an idea, lodged between two lobes of his brain, irritated him to action. To Marlys's chagrin, he lumbered off toward the living room with the mushroom held like a lamp before him. She sagged against the kitchen counter and looked at the remaining five mushrooms that she had worked so long and hard to find. If he recognized them as deadly amanitas, even Scott would become suspicious. She sat down at the kitchen table and started to shake.

"What's the matter with you?" Scott said.

Marlys looked up. He was standing in the doorway, holding out the Death Angel and

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smiling. She tipped back her head, pointing her chin at him, determined to survive whatever came next. To her astonishment, he placed the mushroom beside its mates and said, "Do you think you could make some of your mushroom soup out of these?"

Was he kidding? He didn't sound like he was kidding.

"You mean eat them?" she said, incredulous.

"Of course! I looked them up, and the book says they're delicious. They're called meadow mushrooms."

Marlys could not believe it. The fool! She remembered reading that the deadly amanita was occasionally mistaken for the common meadow mushroom, even though the two looked about as much alike as a pineapple and a lemon. The fact that her husband was one of those fools confirmed everything she had previously concluded about him.

"Well," she said slowly, "if you really think it's all right . . ."

"Come on, Marlys. Who's the mushroom expert in this household anyway?"

Scott Hammer sat at the table and watched his wife ladle soup from the cast iron pot into his bowl, then serve herself from the same pot. This was just too perfect, he thought. It would be like his fantasy with her head getting exploded to bits by a meteorite except it was even better because she would be doing it to herself. She picked the mushrooms. She made the soup. It was like she was killing herself, and all he had to do was sit and watch her do it and somehow figure out how to not eat any of the damn soup. He would let her get started on her bowl first, then think of some excuse. Once she starts eating, he thought, she'll go through the whole bowl. That was the kind of person she was.

Marlys took her seat. They regarded one another from across the soup pot, each politely waiting for the other to begin.

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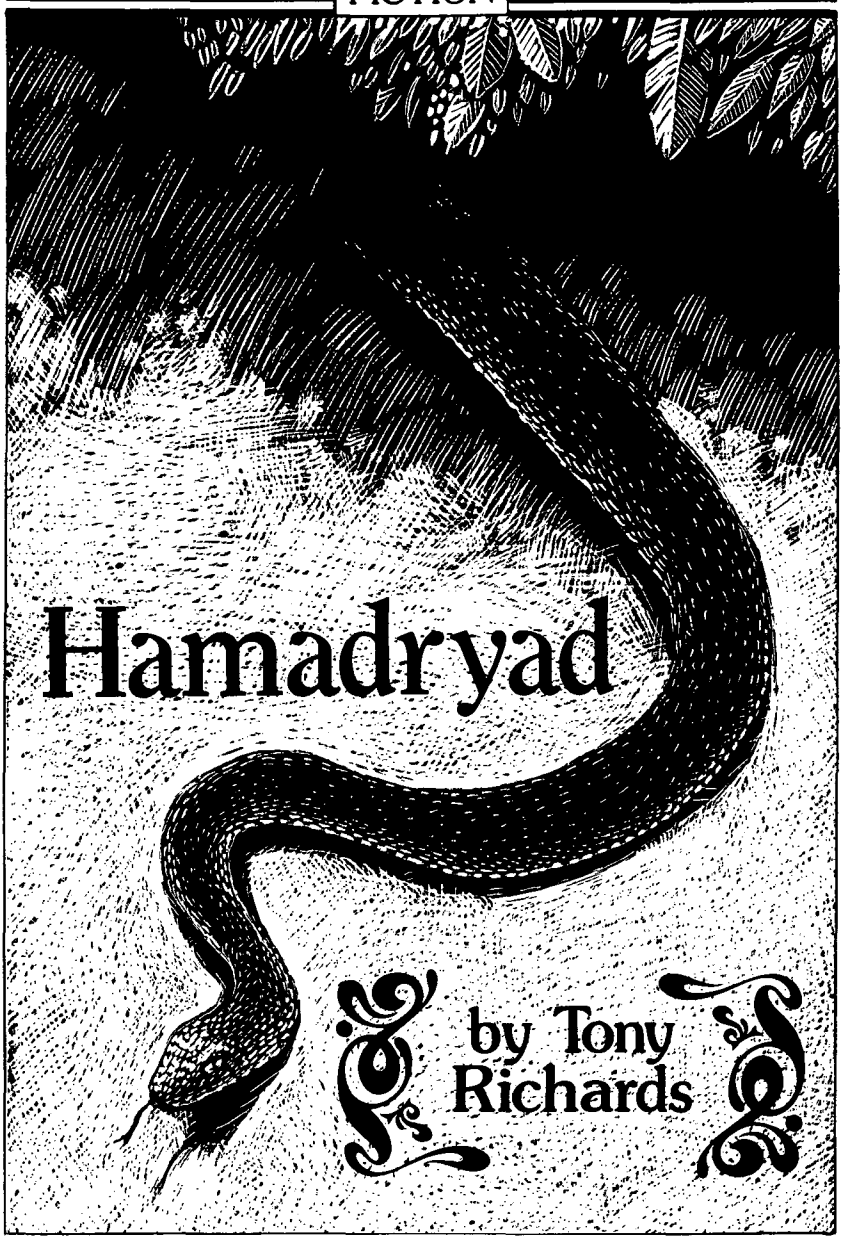

Hamadryad

by Tony Richards

Illustration by Timothy Foley

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I was sitting in a bar on the peak of Kowloon, looking over the water at Hong Kong Island, when Mackenzie hurried in and said, "Are you going to sit there all day, or are you coming?"

I stood and picked up my heavy bag of cameras.

"I'm certainly coming," I said, as unpleasantly as I could manage. "I just can't understand why *you* are."

We argued all the way down to Mackenzie's car.

What it boiled down to, in the end, was that the paper had ordered us both out to Tai Mo Shan Mountain, and that was that. I couldn't understand it. All they really needed were the pictures, with a caption underneath. The first hamadryad scare on Tai Mo Shan for eight years was a photogenic event —*not* the subject for a preening length of prose by Rod Mackenzie.

He was hardly dressed for traipsing about in the Oriental countryside. He was sporting a white blazer and shirt, cream cotton trousers with immaculate creases, and his usual Gucci loafers. I suspected they were fake ones. You can buy them in any of a thousand little shops here.

All the way through the drive out of the city, he kept putting his hand to his blond, streaked hair. Touching it very gently. As though it were made of spun gold. As though it were the world's most precious treasure.

"You know, Fuller," he said as we sat in a traffic snarl-up approaching Lion Rock Tunnel. "I don't mind admitting this, but I'm terrified of snakes."

I hated his calling me "Fuller." It dehumanized me somehow. But it wouldn't have been convenient for him to think of me as human when he'd been seeing my wife Josie for the last four months.

I leaned back against the upholstery and stared at him evenly. "Hamadryads, I suppose, are something to be pretty scared of."

I'd seen one, a few years ago, on an assignment in Malaysia. I'd been in a jeep at the time, about fifty yards distant from the creature, but it still had given me the shivers. The other name for a hamadryad is "king cobra." *Giant* cobra would be rather more accurate.

They grow to up to eighteen feet long and can raise their bullet-shaped heads, their hooded necks, two yards into the air. You'd think a snake of those dimensions would be a constrictor, but the hamadryad isn't. It bites, with enormous fangs. Additionally, it can spit twin jets of poison straight into

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its victim's eyes, with incredible accuracy and range. And it's aggressive. A rattlesnake will bite you only if you disturb it. A hamadryad will spot you from a way off and attack.

A monster it is. A nightmare serpent. I sometimes wonder whether Oriental dragon myths aren't based, in part, on the hamadryad.

The traffic cleared, once we were through the tunnel, and we began to speed through the industrial suburbs at the back of Kowloon, and then into the countryside. There were steep hills to ascend here, and sometimes you could make out the border with China.

It was a bright day, the sun playing an unsuccessful game of hide-and-seek behind a scattering of thin, white, fluffy clouds. Kites wheeled over the treetops all around us. In the clearings there were fields where peasants worked in grey pajamas and coolie hats as their ancestors had done for a thousand years.

My sunglasses jiggled in the breast pocket of my shirt. I thought of putting them on and decided against it.

We began to climb the twisting, narrow road that somehow has gained the odd name of Route Twisk even before we entered Tai Mo Shan Country Park.

I'm used to the drive. Mackenzie wasn't. I come up here regularly, in my free time, to enjoy the views from the mountain peak, walk through the forests. I could steer blindfolded. So I just sat back and enjoyed it while Mackenzie struggled with the hairpin bends and wrestled with the gearshift. The engine of his nice new Toyota screamed as the gradient got ever steeper.

Finally we reached the top. At nine hundred fifty-eight meters, the highest point in the whole colony. The entire city of Kowloon lay spread out below us like some enormous jigsaw puzzle. Beyond that, Hong Kong Island itself was a ghost tale, a mirage, faintly seen through the heat mist rising from the harbor.

The hunt was about to start. Cars and police vehicles were parked everywhere. There were sixty cops, wearing their dark blue paramilitary berets, Hakka peasants who presumably were going to act as guides, and a gaggle of journalists, including a camera crew from the "Pearl" station.

We joined the rest just as a British senior officer with silver insignia on his cap was winding up the briefing.

"Now, this snake's already killed two people," he was reminding the journalists loudly,

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"and it will attack without a moment's warning. So all of you stay close to the police. And it would be a good idea if you covered your eyes somehow. One drop of the hamadryad's poison could completely blind you."

The police were distributing pump-action shotguns amongst themselves now, loading them noisily.

The party split into three groups and moved off.

Mackenzie stared after them almost in bewilderment, his head jerking from side to side. He was shaking badly, I noticed. And he seemed rooted to the spot.

"I don't have anything to cover my eyes with," his voice quavered. It had suddenly become extremely small. "Those things *go* for the eyes, don't they? Their glimmering acts as a kind of trigger."

"Don't worry," I said. "Nothing's going to hurt your baby-blues. Let's follow this crowd. They're going into the deepest part of the forest."

I set off smartly, and he hurried to keep up with me. His nice Gucci loafers and his smart cream pants began to look disheveled after the first hundred yards.

Just up ahead, the police and their Hakka guides were shouting, banging sticks. Making as much racket as they could.

"What are they doing *that* for?" Mackenzie stammered. "They'll attract it to us."

"They're trying to drive it out of cover. And it won't come rushing at so large a group of people. Those things may be vicious, but they're not stupid."

We plunged deeper and deeper into the forest. One hour passed. And then the next. There was no sign of any hamadryad.

"I've got to stop a minute," Mackenzie gasped finally. He was beginning to look as though he'd gone three rounds with a kickboxer. "I've got to rest."

"Your choice. There's more safety in numbers."

"Just a *minute.*"

He stopped dead and sat down heavily on a fallen, rotted tree trunk. Sank his head between his hands. Panted like a beaten dog.

Even now, his fingertips couldn't stop fiddling with his precious golden hair.

His face was drained of blood when he looked up at me again.

"It's the thin air," I told him.

"*Hey!*" He had begun staring, fixedly, at my breast pocket.

"Yes?"

"Hey, you've got a pair of sunglasses there." His expression became pleading, quite pathetic. "Can I have them?"

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"No."

"You're not wearing them. So why the hell *not?*"

I thought about it a long time before I gave my answer.

"Because maybe the hamadryad will spit poison in your face. And then you'll never be able to look at my wife, ever again."

He became completely still. Motionless. Like a statue. As though he believed that, if he pretended he wasn't there, I'd forget him and go away.

Finally, the tip of his tongue came out, flickered at his dry lips. And he forced an embarrassed, childish smile that made me want to kill him there and then.

"I *thought* you knew," he murmured hoarsely.

"Go on. Now tell me that we're both men of the world."

"No. No." He shook his head quickly. "It's just that . . . I want to assure you I've no plans to take Josie *away* from you. That's all."

"Very big of you."

I'd almost decided to close in on him and hit him in the face when the racket up ahead increased.

A shotgun went off. Then another.

Mackenzie leapt to his feet, startled, terrified.

"They've found it," I announced.

The party was out of view, by now. It was too far ahead in the undergrowth.

"Have they *got* it?" Mackenzie quavered.

"Who knows."

"We'd better g-get back."

"Now *that's* a good idea."

But we'd only taken three steps along the trail when an enormous shadow, like the neck of a sea monster, reared up from a bush in front of us.

I froze, entirely still. Then took a chance and flickered my eyes to the left.

Mackenzie, thank heavens, had frozen, too.

I could hear my own blood, pounding in my ears. I felt detached from the ground, from my body. As though my mind were struggling to run away and hide.

Keep rational, I told myself. Think clearly. Think!

I narrowed my eyes and looked right at the hamadryad. It had reared up about six and a half feet above the ground and was as thick around the body as a large man's thigh. Its hood was open wide. Its brown scales glittered like oil in the sunlight.

It was hissing like a steam train, its pink forked tongue flickering in and out. Its small, beady eyes watched us intently.

The creature swayed from

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side to side, trying to figure which one of us to hit.

A strangled, whimpering noise came from Mackenzie.

I glanced at him again. He was crying, the tears streaming down his face.

"For God's sake, stop that," I whispered. "You'll trigger it off."

"I c-can't. Sh-should we run?"

"No!"

I kept still, listened vainly for the sound of rescuers approaching. Nothing. Maybe the police had gone in the opposite direction.

The hamadryad's face jerked forward a couple of feet. Its mouth started coming open.

"It—it's g-going to spit!" Mackenzie whined. His voice was like a four year old's. "P-please give me your s-sunglasses! *Please!*"

Fool! Did he really believe his sight, his life, were more important than mine?

But my mind had become crystal clear, my thoughts very cold. I considered it quickly.

Then, as slowly as a snail, I took my sunglasses out of my breast pocket, reached out, and handed them to him.

He popped them on, without looking at them.

And I stepped back, sharply, out of the way.

As the hamadryad went for him.

It was ten minutes later when the police arrived and shot the beast.

It was still curled up beside Mackenzie, striking at him angrily every so often.

The British senior officer emerged from the trees and bent down beside the corpse, inspected it sadly.

"Your colleague?" he asked me.

I nodded.

"What awful luck." Then he noticed the sunglasses lying beside Mackenzie's face in the dust. He retrieved them, turned them over in his hands. His cheeks flushed. His features darkened. "Are these *his?*"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, that explains it. What kind of idiot wears these with a hamadryad around?"

I had to bite my tongue, to stop myself from laughing.

The hamadryad, the king cobra, goes for the eyes. It's triggered into killing by their twin, bright glimmer.

What kind of idiot, indeed, wears mirror shades?

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FICTION

The Deep End

by Simon P. McCaffery

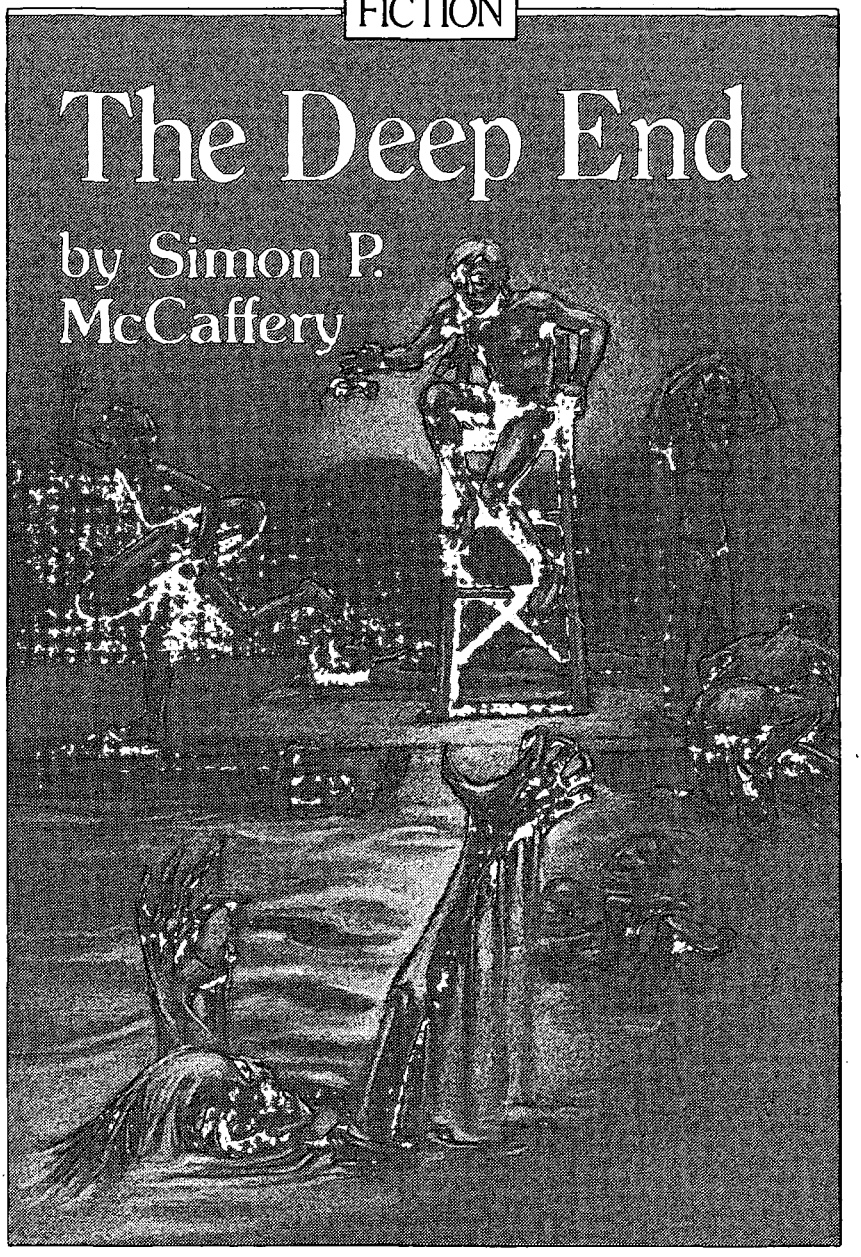

Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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Darren was perched high atop the pool in the orange plastic lifeguard chair, the one overlooking the deep end, when he noticed with a jolt the shape suspended beneath the wavering surface.

Something lay sunken in ten feet of water, out near the center above the drain vent.

It was the second weekend of July, and the Glenwood city pool had been overrun by heat-crazed kids who splashed and frothed the water like piranhas. The L-shaped pool swarmed with airmats and schools of swimmers. Others donned diving masks to explore the light-speckled bottom for glittering coins. A straggled train of swimmers waited to scale the aluminum ladder to the high dive boards, jostling and heckling one another. The girls jackknifed in with precision while the boys, many of whom Darren knew from Glenwood High, performed various gyrating belly flops, smacking the water like stones and sending columns of spray into the air. Summer voices buzzed across the hot air, and the sky burned so shockingly blue that the preceding winter's gray ice and sleety rain seemed as remote as the last ice age. A Dr. Pepper thermometer hanging above the snack bar window registered the mercury pushing ninety-eight, and the concrete deck shimmered like a desert highway.

Darren had been daydreaming of improbable schemes to buy a high-rise manifold for his '66 Mustang without tipping his parents to the missing chunk from his college savings account. The sight of the rippling, distorted shape on the pool's bottom snapped him out of this heat haze like the end of a wet-tipped towel in a locker room shower.

He leaned forward, his brows knitting themselves together in puzzlement.

The commotion on the surface made it difficult to see anything clearly that far down. It looked too big to be a waterlogged beach towel or discarded T-shirt. Probably one of the penny-diving boys waiting for a girl to knife down from the high dive and lose her top. There was a skinny seventh grader, Kyle Berryman, who spent most of the summer submerged off the six foot mark like a Russian sub, squinting intently through his K-mart Aqua-Adventure diving mask, his cheeks bulging like a blowfish. A lot of the girls would flip him the bird on their way to the surface, but this seemed only to excite Kyle further.

Slow seconds passed and Darren's heart began kicking harder

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beneath his ribs. His right hand strayed to the chrome whistle hanging above his bare chest.

The kid wouldn't come up.

While fresh sweat popped out on his relatively zit-free forehead, Darren made two quick deductions. Either this young Cousteau could hold his breath longer than Houdini (or even Kyle Berryman) or he was in the process of drowning right before Darren's eyes.

Smack in the middle of Glenwood's modern, Olympic-size public pool.

Darren stood, ready to blow his whistle, and two very strange things happened.

For a moment the surface cleared like crystal, just long enough for Darren to see what was hanging down there: a redhaired girl in a sleek black tank suit, not a boy. She seemed to stare straight up at Darren with eyes greener than seawater, her long hair floating around her face like a flaming veil. Darren was assaulted by a laser-like sense of déjà vu.

Pamela Hartman?

A tubby kid named Doogan bounded off the diving board and hit the water atop the submerged girl in an explosive cannonball (of course, when you're shaped like ten-year-old Jerry Doogan it is damn near impossible *not* to cannonball). Darren lost sight of the girl (drowning?) as a miniature tidal wave swept across the pool's surface.

The ripples smoothed themselves a few moments later but the girl in the deep end had vanished. Except for a fleeting second when Darren imagined he saw a black and orange shadow slip down through the drain vent.

Darren blinked behind his RayBans. The overpowering feeling of déjà vu was replaced by vertigo as he stared at the pool bottom. Nothing there but wavering light dancing on cobalt concrete.

The girl must have darted away and surfaced after the Doogan kid hit the water. Darren scanned the surface but didn't see any redheads. Still, there were a lot of heads and shoulders bobbing around. False alarm. His heart gradually slowed to a trot.

He was about to sit down when the other two lifeguards simultaneously blew their whistles in a shrill double scream.

Darren jerked, leaned out beyond the point of balance, and barely caught himself by grabbing the edge of the tower, white-knuckled. His heart slammed into his throat like an icy cannonball. For one terrifying second he really expected to look down and

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see the flame-haired girl's water-choked body floating in the pool, dead eyes bulging up at him in accusation.

But it was only the signal for the first fifteen minute break of the afternoon; everybody out of the pool.

Darren climbed down from his chair, ignoring the swimmers—mostly fellow white suburb kids—who dripped wet trails back to scattered towels. Boom boxes blared to life, bombarding the still air with heavy metal percussion. Coppertoned hands counted wet coins, and a new line formed at the snack counter. The Glenwood crowd knew that fizzy soda and deliciously frozen candy bars were a sure way to keep the blood spiked with sugar. On the baking deck, rows of cliquish girls began the ritual of combing wet hair and applying suntan accelerator before arranging themselves as splayed, willing sacrifices to the sun.

Darren, the tallest of the lifeguards with legs made to run down tennis balls, padded to the edge of the pool, feeling the concrete under his soles like a blowtorch. He watched the water bend the sunlight into ribbons that wiggled across the deep end's bottom in hypnotic, inviting patterns. During breaks he usually stepped off into that sapphire coolness to wash away the sweat and boredom. He stared at the water, unsure. How long could he hold *his* breath? Ninety seconds, two minutes maybe, if he had a chance to tank up.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he flinched. Turning, he saw his square jawed, tanned face reflected twice in Steph's chrome Boss-man shades. His eyes looked distant, spaced out. And tired; he hadn't been sleeping well. The unrelenting heat made him feel like a zombie. Darren the Undead.

"Time," she said, then sauntered back to her tower. On the far bank of the pool, Marc was already seated on his orange throne, looking like a Soloflex ad. Climbing into his chair like a sleepwalker, Darren wondered where the fifteen minutes had gone. A restless murmur rose from the ranks of younger kids. He barely noticed the sculpted brunette in a French cut on the other side who tried to lock eyes. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? Babes like her were the only reason he risked sunstroke at the pool lifeguarding. It sure wasn't for the pay.

The whistles blew, his own adding its piercing note to the chorus, and the pool's glassy stillness was shattered as swimmers tumbled in like lemmings.

* * *

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That night he dreamed of Pamela Hartman and awoke in his bedroom smelling chlorine and something rotted. He'd tried to scream before waking, but his mouth had been full of cold blue water.

He shivered, disoriented, huddled miserably in the sweaty sheets. Already the images were blurring, melting away. Weren't you supposed to recall dreams (okay, nightmares) best after one woke you?

But he remembered enough. He'd driven to the pool to swim laps, but in the illogic of dreams the sun had long since disappeared; it was well past midnight, in fact. The pool was deserted and ominous in the moonlight—a black living mirror waiting to swallow him. He peeled off his clothes and dived in, no trunks, stroking to the far side of the deep end as if it was the morning warmup with the other lifeguards.

Darren swam back and forth, smoothly. Back and forth. And as an almost delicious fatigue began to creep into his shoulders, arms, and legs, he had felt something brush his left foot. Something cold and sharp, like a finger stripped of its flesh. A bony hand closed around his ankle like a vise.

He had looked down into the shadowy water in surprise and seen what was left of Pamela's gray, bloated face grinning up, pulling him down for one last kiss—

Darren rolled out of bed and staggered to the bathroom beyond his work desk. His parents liked to keep the air conditioning set on Arctic, and he felt gooseflesh crawl down his back and legs.

He ran the sink faucet, cupped his hands, and drank. The water tasted tangy, like pool water. A chemical taste, masking any impurities. But at least it replaced the dry, stale taste of fear.

Crossing his dark bedroom, Darren plopped back into bed. The nightmares had started a week after he'd earned a berth as summer lifeguard at the pool. They were growing steadily worse. And today, he had been hallucinating. Look, Ma, no LSD!

It was this heat wave, and too much partying. His parents were ragging him to quit the pool and get a job that netted some major paychecks for his college account. Yeah, well, he had no intention of spending the final summer dressed in a baggy polyester tunic flipping Big Macs. Or searing his wrists on smoky pizza ovens.

No, sitting all day beneath the blazing sun-god and scoping chicks was the only way to go, even if four twenty-five an hour wasn't exactly swelling the college coffers.

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Darren wiped the sheen of perspiration from his face. Why start dreaming about Pamela Hartman now, and why associate her with the deep end? The accident had been *four years ago,* when he was fourteen, charming the girls as if he were seventeen with his blue eyes and broad shoulders. It had been an awful thing, but he had put it behind him. His folks never mentioned it, at least never in front of him. He shouldn't dwell on it now. He should enjoy his last summer before his four year sentence commenced. Kick up his heels and dip his wick as often as possible.

But it was a long time before he drifted back to sleep, still smelling rotted fish and chlorine.

Darren was manning the middle chair when it happened, so he had a front row seat for the whole nasty affair—Marc rescuing the unconscious little boy, the nearly-failed resuscitation by the paramedics . . . and the redhaired girl who couldn't have been watching from the high dive board, leering at him.

He was daydreaming again, this time about how he might best get into Mindy Clark's skintight pants, when Marc's whistle abruptly sliced the air. Darren's heart tripped like a blind man at a two foot curb.

Marc was already diving toward the water, the muscles in his legs and shoulders standing out in sharp relief. He disappeared under the surface like a torpedo.

On the far bank, Steph was hurrying down from her chair, towel in hand, face pale underneath her caramel tan. She shouted something at Darren and gestured wildly. The sound of her voice, clearly scared spitless, broke his paralysis, and he scrambled down from his tower.

Marc surfaced a moment later, coughing and gasping, the limp body of a boy under his meaty left arm. Steph hurriedly spread her towel on the wet concrete, then ran to call 911. Darren helped hoist the unconscious kid, later identified as Jimmy Donnely, out of the water. His spindly, eleven-year-old body couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds sopping wet but it felt like two hundred. Jimmy was still wearing a cheap black rubber diving mask (an apprentice of Kyle Berryman?) and goofy, kid-sized flippers. Darren quickly stripped them off. Jimmy's eyes were closed, and his skinny chest wasn't rising and falling. Limp as a dishrag, too.

Marc began trying to force the life back into Jimmy's body before a spellbound ringlet of onlookers. His trembling hands compressed

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the kid's chest, and a fountain of water magically erupted from his mouth and nose. Tilting the head back to clear the windpipe, as per their Red Cross training, Marc started CPR.

He was still propelling air into Jimmy's lungs and pumping his chest when two paramedics arrived. Ten minutes later Jimmy still wasn't breathing, and his pulse was flagging. Darren stood rooted to the spot, fighting a feeling of faintness and nausea.

The thirty-something paramedics were starting to eye one another when Jimmy convulsed, sputtered, and resumed living. There were enough claps, cheers, and sighs to fill a game show laughtrack. Darren felt the tension flow out of his body like warm recycled beer.

Everyone was watching the paramedics carry Jimmy away on a gurney, so no one saw the redhaired girl in the jet one-piece standing on the end of the high dive board. No one except Darren.

She waved at him, blew him a kiss, and dived. Her slender body made no sound when it arrowed through the surface. No concussion . . . no spreading, circular wave. She didn't surface, and Darren could only stare at the tiny, distorted drain vent in disbelief.

He'd seen her out of the water this time. Even from the height of the diving board there could be no mistaking who it was. Pamela.

That night the horror show inside his head didn't replay the midnight scene at the pool. Instead, he was fourteen again, visiting Nassau with his parents. Summer vacation, 1988. He met Pamela Hartman on the white powder beach, knew by her eyes immediately that she was interested. Barely sixteen, Pamela was a knockout; gorgeous red hair and a firm, freckle-skinned body to kill for. He'd often passed for seventeen and didn't think it wise to admit he was only in junior high.

Or that he couldn't swim very well.

Pamela couldn't swim at all, so he offered to teach her. Mainly so he could play with her . . . lay his hands on some of that foxy flesh. Maybe even slide some fingers under that suit, if she was willing.

He hadn't counted on the undercurrent, or that she would panic so quickly when they both lost hold of his air mattress. In over his head with waves spinning him and water rushing into his mouth, he had . . . simply freaked out. Lost his cool. He heard Pamela's choking pleas for help, behind him. But he'd paddled the other way, toward shore. Every sailor for himself, right? He'd read that a drowning person's first reaction is to grab something in a death-

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grip and pull it down with them. All Darren wanted was air to breathe and solid land under his feet. And he made it . . . barely.

Pamela didn't.

The Coast Guard dragged the water, and the beach patrol scoured the pristine shores for her body. But the Caribbean tides had swallowed her, sucked her down and away. It had been an accident, and though devastated, the Hartmans had not tried to cause any trouble. Darren was hysterical—had cried until his eyes burned and sticky snot ran from his nose, like a little kid—yet a tiny, terrible voice deep in his head reminded him, better her than you, cowboy.

A year later, with the approval of his parents, Darren had enrolled in Red Cross training to become a certified lifeguard.

It happened again a week later, when the water was awash with flotillas of swimmers, cannonballing boys and copper women drifting on silver airmats. The unending heat wave was killing lawns, flowerbeds, and the town's elderly shut-ins, but it was great for pool attendance.

This time it was Steph who rescued the teenage girl, Patti Cox, from the deep end. Her pallid, pimple-spotted face was vaguely familiar, as if she'd sat next to Darren in a homeroom class. Steph had rotated to the third chair, having traded places with Darren for the day, when Patti's head erupted from the water like a goggle-eyed bass, her mouth gasping. She cried out, and the water-choked words sounded like *GABBEDME!* Then her head popped under like a cork on a fishing line.

Unlike little Jimmy, she started breathing again after less than a minute of CPR, briskly applied by a white-faced Steph. Patty's eyes snapped open like window shades and she spit up a cup of clear pool water. She was definitely getting air, screaming and flailing, something about her leg. There *was* a thin bruise above her right ankle, probably from being hauled over the concrete lip of the pool.

Darren began cutting practices and kept far away from the water during breaks. A few times he gazed down at a girl in a nearly nonexistent two-piece and saw something else below her, out near the center. A pale hand waving from the drain vent, beckoning to him.

Come on in, the water's fine. Christ!

Was it possible to develop a phobia at eighteen? He was the

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lifeguard. Decorated ex-member of the high school swim team! And who the hell had ever heard of a haunted swimming pool?

Darren didn't see Pamela again until the last blistering Saturday of July.

The dreams had intensified, become exponentially more horrifying each night. In these airless night terrors she told him that she had been searching for him, that it wasn't so bad below the waves. He could only imagine her green eyes and sylphlike form swimming through miles of briny ocean depths, inlets, rivers, streams, city water pipes . . . until she had finally poured herself into the pool.

He'd managed to scream last night, waking his parents as well.

The pool was clogged with swimmers by two, the water transformed into a rippling, flawed diamond. Darren was manning the third chair; none of the other lifeguards had been willing to trade. The two chairs above the deep end were bad luck. Marc sat on the other bank, looking smaller somehow.

Immediately after the three o'clock break, Darren saw a fortyish woman duck beneath the surface, kick off the side wall, and begin gliding to the far side. Her hair was going gray, but she had a fine, shapely body. Darren followed her progress, admiring her graceful form.

The water seemed to shiver. Pamela was suddenly below her, hovering above the drain vent like an evil aquatic genie, reaching up with pale starfish hands.

Darren's breath clogged in his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut behind his polarized sunglasses. Then opened them.

Pamela was choking the woman, who thrashed and kicked and bubbled furiously.

Rearing up, his body numb despite the heat, Darren delivered the glittering whistle to his lips and made it shriek. Without a glance at the other stations he tore off his sunglasses and dived far out above the pool, feeling for a second that weightless, dreamy terror. He nearly forgot to gulp some air before the blood-warm water closed over his head.

Darren stroked downward through the topaz water, chlorine biting his staring eyes, down and away from the sun and surface. The rough bottom scraped his toes and elbows as he skimmed above it. He saw black, fuzzy dots that might be coins or the curled bodies of waterlogged insects. From the height of the chair the pool assumed a tidy, familiar geometry, but deep beneath its surface the

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sunken plain of the bottom seemed to stretch indefinitely. The surface looked fathoms above him, a glowing concave lens.

He moved in to grasp the woman, who was beginning to sink, her face a picture of shock and pain. Pamela had disappeared, presumably back down the drain vent. Darren circled an arm around the unconscious woman's torso and prepared to kick up to the surface—

—and would have, except that something clamped around his right ankle. Darren kicked in panic and lost his purchase on the gritty bottom. It was Pamela. She quickly trapped his other ankle in a crushing grip. Darren twisted, released the dying woman he'd been about to rescue, and found himself face to face with Pamela.

She looked the same as in his dreams. The sleek black tank suit was stained a seaweed green and stretched too tightly across her bloated body. There were lots of tiny holes in the suit, as if nibbling fish had been at it, perhaps the same ones who had fed on Pamela's eyes. Moss covered her swollen face like a rotting beard.

They sank together. Darren grappled with her desperately, but it was like battling empty air . . . or slippery water. *Let go of me, you bitch!*

Pamela gurgled something from her grotesque white lips and pulled him closer.

Darren felt his panic spike, peak, and overload some integral circuit breaker of reason. He opened his mouth and screamed a cloud of silver bubbles that raced upward to the light. Water immediately tried to snake up his nose, and he swallowed some, gagging reflexively. His temples pounded a frantic warning. Black spots swam in his vision like playful amoebae.

The last thing Darren saw was his own dislocated body settling gently on the bottom, blue eyes wide below a floating corona of sand-colored hair. He saw this clearly, though he wasn't wearing a mask.

Pamela held only his hand now . . . or an appendage of whatever fluid thing he had become. She was taking him down the drain vent, down to wherever she lived. To whatever cold darkness waited.

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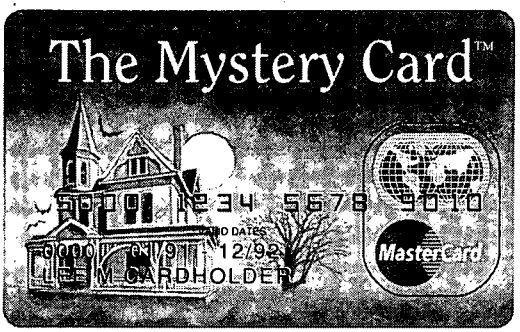

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FIRST NAME | INITIAL | LAST NAME

DATE OF BIRTH / / | SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER — — | HOME PHONE ( ) -

ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PRESENT EMPLOYER | WORK PHONE ( ) - | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year) | WORK PHONE ( ) - | YEARS THERE

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ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

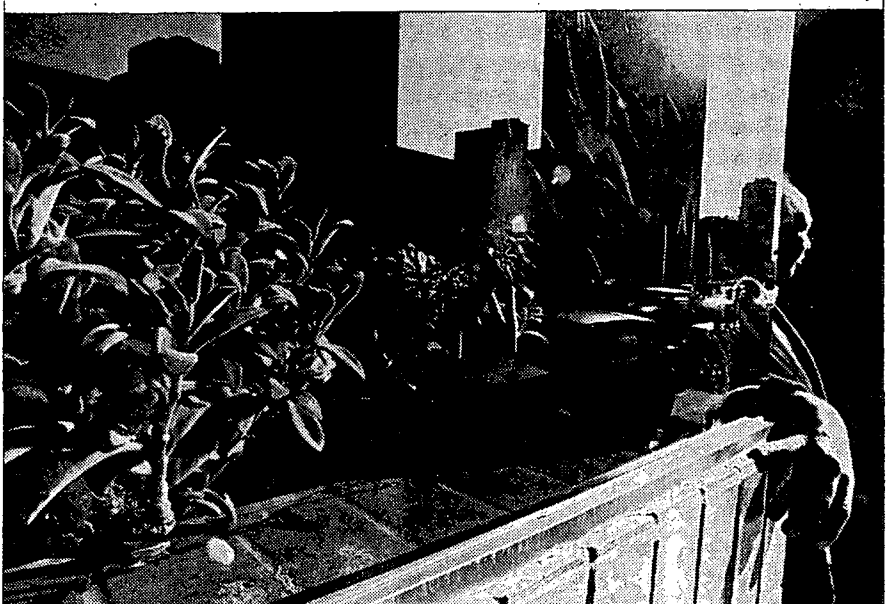

Photo by Algimantas Kezys

Prelude to a stretch. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

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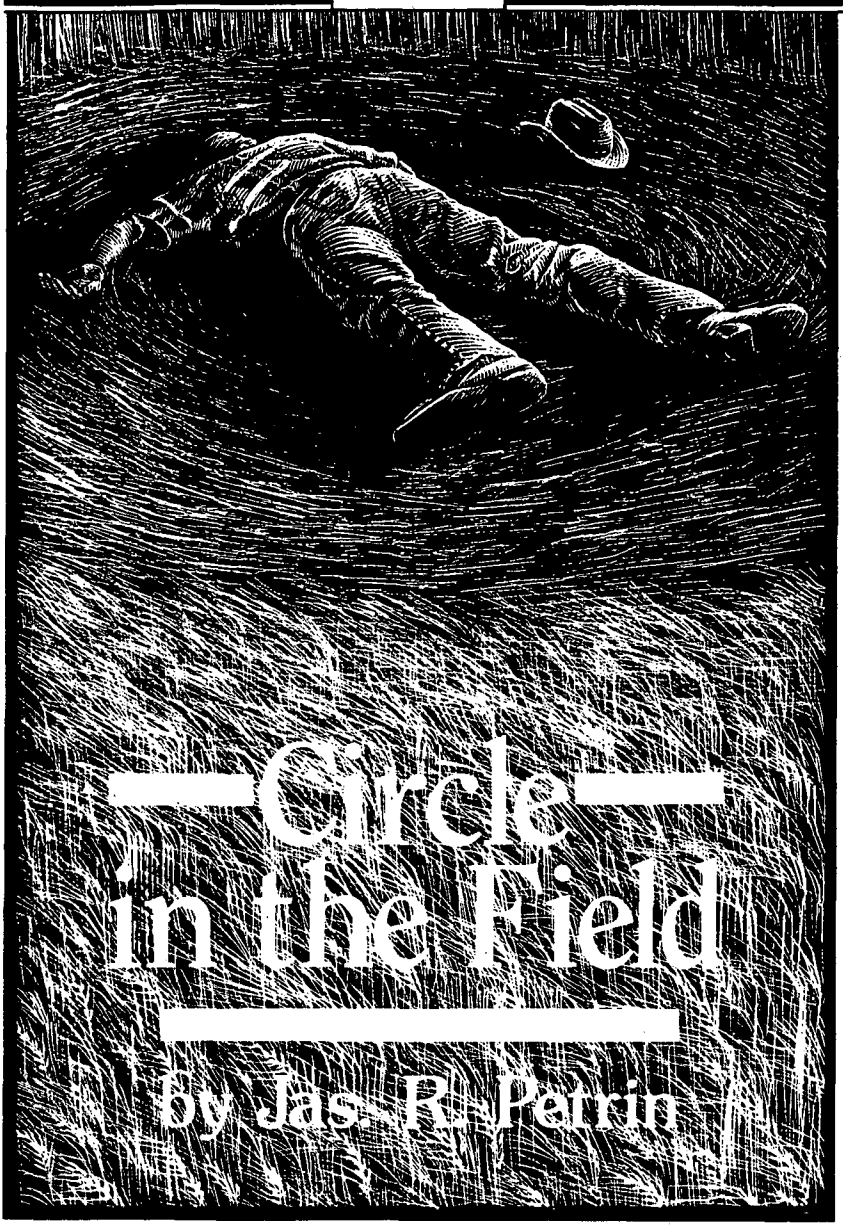

Circle in the Field

by Jas. R. Petrin

Illustration by Kelly Maddox

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"There's that farmer again, name of Smith, out here in the hall, wants to see you. The one keeps phoning and phoning? Holy Hannah. He's just hopping. Ready to turn around, jump and explode," Claudia Webb said into the telephone.

Chief Robideau said, "Not him again."

"Better see him," Claudia Webb warned, "he looks pretty mad. Like a wild astronaut on the final countdown. Ready to shoot straight up and turn left."

The chief ran his hand through what was left of his hair and glanced around his office wishing he had a secret door to escape through—something he figured all police chiefs should have—but hell, here in End of Main a chief was lucky to have even a front door, if you could say lucky when it couldn't open without some fool wandering in with a sharp stick to poke you with. Some fool like Enoch Smith.

He said into the phone, "He don't look like he's got a weapon on him at all, does he?"

"Nope. Not unless it's some sort of concealed weapon."

"Okay. Send him in. I'll take my chances."

"Weapon like Dirty Harry's got, blow a hole in you the size of North Dakota, he might have one of those."

The chief put his phone down, opened his top desk drawer and checked to make sure his Colt Detective Special was there, took a Rolaids while he was at it—big jar, two hundred tablets, just about empty — and sat and waited and watched his office door.

It opened.

Enoch Smith strode in.

Claudia Webb was right. Smith had his afterburners on. You could pretty near see the flames lick out the cuffs of his denim trousers each time his thick-soled boots hit the floor. He stomped up to the desk, spread his big fingers down flat, and yelled:

"She's gone too far this time, Robideau! You got to stop her. A man farms the land nine-tenths his livelong life, a serious man, a hardworking man, a woman like that's got no right to come dancing in with the flimflam and jiggery-pokery and put the kibosh on it, and that's clear-speaking and you know it!"

"This about Madame Galamboski again, Enoch?" Robideau slipped his hand into his top drawer. Not for the Detective Special, but for another Rolaids.

"Who else?" Enoch Smith clapped his big hands like a cherry bomb going off, went to

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the window, and looked out the way a man will when he doesn't want to see anything.

"Who else'd be so full of misery she'd bring a working man to death's door, an' when he won't die, can't die, too damn tough to die, turn around out of sheer spite and knock half his wheat down flat?"

"I heard you were sick," Robideau said, gumming the Rolaids, trying to make it last.

"Sick? That don't cover it! Sick as a dog. Sick as a poisoned pig. Damn woman pretty near had me down at the Green Valley funeral home, splang out on a slab with that prancing Al Evans pumping the best part of me out with a rubber hose. Packing me with preservatives. She'd of got me there, too, if I wasn't already preserved. At least my liver is. That's all what saved me—"

"You saying she poisoned you? That's a serious charge."

Enoch folded his thick arms across his thick chest. Thick hairy wrists. Thick neck under a thick head. A thick fellow, all round. And tall. His Massey Ferguson hat nearly scraped the light fixture hanging from its chain.

"Chief Robideau, a woman like that, she can poison you any way she likes. Only has to rub that crystal ball of hers, fiddle that Ouija board, flap them giant cards around, ones she keeps in her shop window to scare people with, them carrot cards—"

"Tarot cards."

"Whatever. Big cards, size of axe blades, just as dangerous. Should be registered. Lethal weapons. She flaps 'em around—*wham!*—half a man's wheat falls over. There it is, look at it. A perfect circle, that's the giveaway. Had to be her."

Chief Robideau put his face in his hands. Not a smart thing to do with Enoch Smith set to pull a concealed weapon and start blasting. But the chief took his time, massaging his temples, then his brow, finally raising his face and studying his irate visitor through red-rimmed eyes.

"Going to fill me in on this so-called circle, Enoch?"

"What's to tell? Circle's a circle. No corners. There it is, planked on the ground. All the evidence you need, splang in the middle of my number one winter wheat. Come on out, roll it up, bring it back for evidence, I won't stop you."

"Big circle, Enoch? Or small?"

"Big!" He spread his arms. "Drop a barn in it. Come out with me now, I'll show you what that woman done. Seein's believin', right?"

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Robideau thought about the twelve-mile ride out Highway 324 towards Rembrandt in the heat. With his acid stomach? Sure. Right.

"Suppose, just suppose, I maybe first have a talk with that lady. Find out why she'd want to do a thing like that to a fella like you."

Enoch Smith stood up straight as a poker and his eyes flew open.

"Hold the phone! That woman's a liar, chief. I swear to you I didn't do a thing to her."

"You want me to check this out or don't you?"

Enoch Smith thought it over, sucking in air to make his cheeks puff out.

"Well, I guess so. I guess you're gonna have to do *some*thing, chief. Hell, I'm ready to take and do something myself. Make a citizen's arrest, I don't know."

"Arrest? Hold on. You're way ahead of me. You're not arresting nobody, and neither am I. At least not yet. Arrest her for what?"

Enoch Smith shook his big sunburnt head like he was sorry for all the chiefs of police that had ever lived.

"Damn it, Chief Robideau, don't you know nothin' in your own damn town? Woman running that shop all this time, hexing and spiriting, flinging meanness and evil around, ready to murder me? Well, that woman don't even have a license!"

There wasn't much point driving. Madame Galamboski was only a block up and over, across from the Rexall Drugs, next to the Perth's dry cleaners. And his patrol car had no air conditioning. Might as well walk.

He stopped to tell Claudia Webb and, while he was at it, quiz her about Smith and the Galamboski woman, ask her did she know anything.

"Everybody knows about them two, chief. Everybody except you."

"I must know something. I'm talking about them, aren't I?"

"You're not talking, you're asking. And only because the big galoot is hounding you. Fact is, them two were, well—there's only one way to put it—shacked up. Him and her. The two of them. She broke it off, what she told me one day I had my tea leaves read, 'cause he's so darn mean. Bulldog mean. Wake up in the morning, take a bite out of the bed rail mean. Now he claims *she's* trying to kill *him?* I'll believe that when cows dance."

"He never told me all *that.*"

"No. And he never told you

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how he chased her from the barn to the house with a muck rake, either, I bet. And how she had to chase him right back again with a rifle. And now here he comes with these stories about how she's hexing him, things going wrong on the farm, nonsense like that."

"He won't let go, that what you're trying to tell me?"

"It's what I *am* telling you, chief."

Chief Robideau leaned against her desk. "If he wants her back, he's got an odd way of showing it." He thought a bit. "He might miss her, though, he's been alone a while." He thought some more. "And his actual wife, what's the chance he could take up with her again?" The idea appealed mightily to Robideau. The perfect solution. Shut Smith up, leave Galamboski alone, solve the problem. "How long they been split up, him and the wife—two, three years?"

"Try four, five years, chief. Good grief! You need a calendar strapped to your arm, not a wristwatch. She's long gone. And anyway I doubt she'd take him back if he came on a plate, stuffed full of twenty dollar bills, with a candy apple in his mouth. Nobody'd blame her, neither. *I* wouldn't."

"You don't think much of Enoch Smith."

"Nobody thinks much of Enoch Smith. Except they ought to strap him to a fence rail on a dark night and wait for a real witch to fly down out of the sky and zap him. Let her fix his red wagon for him—pow!—and leave two socks standing straight up, smoking."

"Socks don't stand straight up."

"His would."

Chief Robideau stopped in front of the gold-lettered sign that read NATASHA'S CONVENTICLE, and gave it the uneasy eyeball.

He passed this corner four times a day going to and from his office, and his own wife came here to have her palm read, but he'd never really taken a good hard look at it.

Until now.

Now a hundred details jumped out of the window at him, shouting.

Poster of a woman with six or eight arms, a staring eyeball in the palm of each hand. Two big marbles in a box labeled ORIENTAL WORRY BALLS. And a mannequin hag, hook-beaked, snaggletoothed, grinning out of a box with a coin slot on it that said 5 CENTS, reminding him of a story he'd read as a boy, "Something Wicked This Way Comes."

And a card propped against

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a plastic (he hoped) skull, that read:

NATASHA'S SECOND SIGHT
CONVENTICLE
Chiromancy—Fortunes Read
Cartomancy—Fates Foretold
A Candle in the Shadows of Your Life!
(Major Credit Cards Accepted)

And what the heck *was* a conventicle, anyway?

The chief pushed open the curtained glass door and went in.

There was a tinkle in some hidden room, like a small piece of glass, gently breaking.

"Hoo-ooo! There in a minute!" A throaty female voice.

Waiting, the chief glanced around. So this was where his wife spent her spare time and cash. The room she talked about like it was the astrological control center of the world. Didn't look like much. Messy, that was his impression. Beads all over the place. Curtains. A crystal ball on a table.

Then Madame Galamboski bustled in, a handsome, dark-haired woman with the palest skin he had ever seen. He'd only caught glimpses of her before. Once in the 7-Eleven. A couple more times at the Legion on bingo night.

Her eyes were huge. Maybe from astonishment at some of her second sights. Her nails were—let's see, were they dark red? No, they were black. Jet black.

She recognized him. Her smile faded slowly. Something about those eyes, all right. He could feel the hair on the back of his head prinking up.

"Have you come to put me in jail, you bad man?"

"Well, no—"

"Because if you have, I shall certainly tell your lovely wife on you."

There was an accent in her speech. Not Ukrainian. He knew lots of Ukrainians. Maybe Polish.

There was something else, too, some sort of magnetism, as if she were the one in control. Make him jump through a hoop. Roll over and bark.

He said, "Your crystal ball steered you wrong this time."

"I didn't need that. I received a phone call. From a big bad man who was once a friend. He said he had reported me to the authorities and that it was only a matter of time before they put me in prison."

Robideau felt he would like to get his hands on Smith.

"Madame Galamboski . . . "

"Natasha."

"Madame Galamboski, let's keep this official. I'm here on a complaint made to me by a local citizen—"

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"A local bully, you mean."

"—by the name of Enoch Smith." He watched her nose wrinkle. "He made some accusations. First, that you've been intentionally harassing him . . . "

"Harassing? Is that how he put it? Not hexing?"

The chief felt embarrassed.

"Don't be shy, Chief Robideau. One does not need the second sight to read Enoch Smith. A squint in a fog will do. What did he tell you? That I make his chickens drunk? His cows crosseyed? His hogs climb into the trees?"

She was having fun with him.

"Well, ma'am, he does blame you for things going wrong around his farm. Mainly, he claims you took and squashed a great big part of his wheatfield down."

Her eyebrows rode up prettily. "Oh? That is interesting. And how am I to have done such a thing? Driving through it in my little car?"

"Nothing like that, ma'am. What he says, you took and, without actually touching it, somehow squashed it all down in a great big circle."

"Really?" Her dark eyes were huge, you could fall into them and not climb out again.

"I plan to go see it myself this evening. A big circle, smack in the middle of his field, he says. Flat, like the hail got it. Only hail don't fall in a circle, does it?"

She kept on gathering him in, gathering him in, as if he were something she wanted to tell her grandchildren about.

"It might," she said, "if someone with a special power made it fall."

"Oh, now . . . "

"That is what he's suggesting, isn't it? That I did exactly that? Do *you* think I could do a thing like that?"

Robideau wished he had brought some Rolaids along.

"I don't care what you *could* do, Madame Galamboski. Only about what you *did* do. Or *didn't,* more to the point. But I don't think you magically squashed part of Smith's wheatfield, I'm pretty sure of that."

She shrugged. "Then . . . "

"But there's his second accusation."

This was the hard part. And he didn't like it. After all, the End of Main Business Council hadn't said a word about her. But a complaint had been made all the same; he couldn't ignore it.

"He claims, Madame Galamboski, that you're operating this place of business without a license. That true?"

Her face fell this time. He could see he had gotten to her,

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and he felt rotten about it. He waited for a denial or explanation. When none came, he said, "We're a small town, Madame Galamboski. We don't get too heated up about rules and regulations. And the Business Council don't mind, probably because you sell something nobody else does. But I'm a cop. I got to act on a complaint, that's what they pay me for."

She said, "So?"

"I guess what I'm saying, you're going to have to close up shop, at least till you get licensed by the End of Main Municipal Office."

Madame Galamboski sank into a chair.

"I tried once. The businessmen, they are on the town council. They won't license me. They don't close me down, but they won't let me be a part of their council. They think, I don't know, that I'm not suitable."

She was rubbing the backs of her hands as if the room had suddenly grown cold. Robideau said, "I'm sorry. *Very* sorry, ma'am. But if you want to do business, you'll have to talk them into it. It's the only way, now I'm involved."

He went out, and heard the gentle breaking-glass sound of the bells again, and felt as if something had broken inside himself at the same time.

"But why would he go to the police," she said, "unless he suspected?"

"Probably to complain about getting hexed," he answered her, "which is what we *want* him to do. It means, don't it, that our plan is paying off?"

"Just so he doesn't say anything might point that dope Robideau in the right direction."

"He don't know what the right direction is," he said. "Nobody does."

"Yes." Her voice quiet, her eyes looking deep into his. "I guess you're right."

"And he won't be around to draw nobody a map later. That's the plan, too."

"Yes." Her voice so thin and hard it was almost a whisper. "Yes."

Mrs. Robideau came into the dining room like a woman with a weight on her mind. She set down the pot she was carrying, scooped a ladle into it, and splatted a large mess of noodles onto Robideau's plate. Then she banged the pot onto the sideboard, like maybe she saw a nail there she wanted to drive in with it, and sat down hard across from him, glaring.

"Okay," Robideau said, "I give up. It's not I forgot your

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birthday, that was last April. Not our anniversary, that's in November. So I guess I give up. Tell me."

She kept her icy eyes on him.

"You went into Natty Galamboski's place today. Crashed her door down, waved your nightstick at her. May as well tell me. No use lying."

"I was there, sure, but—"

"Made a bunch of threats, yelling."

"I did my job, that's all. Told her the facts."

"Hah! When she called me she was just sobbing, poor thing. Some facts you told her. A bunch of foolishness some drunken farmer blabbed at you? Since when is that 'the facts'?"

She had him there. He had indeed gone to Madame Galamboski a bit prematurely, hadn't even gone to see the crop damage first, trying to save himself a hot drive out to Smith's place.

He picked up a forkful of noodles and looked at them. That's all they were. Noodles. No sauce, no meat, no cheese. He put down the fork.

"Listen, a guy makes a complaint, I got to check it out, don't I? Talk to some folks. If one of those folks happens to be a friend of yours, well, that's just how it is." He glanced at his plate. "Got any cheese for this?"

"There's plenty of cheese," Mrs. Robideau said in an injured tone, "down the street at the Family Fare. Except the Family Fare's closed, you'd have to break the door down, but you're good at that." She straightened her shoulders. "I might have cheese here, I might not. First, I want to know about your police brutality. Shutting Natty down, of all things. Poor woman's just frantic."

Robideau tried to imagine a frantic Madame Galamboski but had to give it up. He said, "She's got to have a license to run a business. It's the law, and she don't."

"Pooh. You're supposed to have a license to go down to the creek fishing, *that's* the law, too, and *you* don't."

Robideau felt himself coloring. He didn't know his wife had taken notice of that.

"She's open every day," he said defensively. "Every day, for Pete's sake. Selling herbal teas, telling fortunes—"

"Yes, and two, three, four times a year you drive yourself off to Netley Creek—*town* vehicle, *taxpayer's* gas—and throw a pointy hooked thing in the water and bob it around all day at the end of a line, and if that isn't fishing, then I don't know what fishing is, that's all. Maybe fishing is something

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else entirely. Maybe I ought to go ask Judge Hawthorn what fishing is."

She was turning nasty now.

"You wouldn't."

"I mean, what else is a judge good for, that's what I want to know, especially that judge."

"Listen, if you breathe one word—"

"Breathe a word? That's what I do best. Suck in air, and pop words out all over the place. No telling what words. No telling when. Right beside the judge in the checkout at the liquor store, maybe, not a thing I can do about it."

Robideau placed a hand over his stomach. He didn't feel like eating noodles any more, not even if they had cheese on them.

"Okay, you made your point. Don't hit me over the head with it. If supper's over, I got work to do."

"Maybe fishing is banging those different colored balls around on that green table with the money on the edge of it, back of Al's Gas-O-Hol."

"Goodbye."

"Or watching those videos Wilmer Gates brings up in brown wrappers from the city, late at night in the Legion, the lights off and the doors all locked."

"I'm going now," Robideau said.

"I mean, how am I supposed to know what fishing is?" she called after him as he went out.

They parked in some trees, then sneaked up to the farm on its blind side through the firs that made a windbreak on its northwest corner. They entered the barn through a door she showed him and got up into the loft, slick, no trouble at all.

"You got gloves?"

He nodded.

"Good. We don't want your fingerprints on that gun, only his. Or we can burn it, I don't care."

"You sure you can get ahold of it?"

"Course. He keeps it in the gun rack on the kitchen wall. Like I said, I'll tell him I heard about the circle, that I came out to see it. Bat my eyes at him."

"What if he asks where your vehicle is?"

"He won't. He only thinks about himself. He'll be thinking, she came all the way out here to see me. I play my cards right, she'll stay the night, that's what'll be on his mind."

"Well, don't forget to shake and wiggle yourself at him."

"Cast a spell on him?"

They both laughed.

"Okay," he said, "so you get halfway out to the field with him, you say, oops, got to go back to use the bathroom, you

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say for him to go ahead and you'll catch up, you run back to the house, get the gun, hurry back out and leave it just inside the barn door."

"That's right."

"Making sure it's loaded."

"It's always loaded."

They stood in the dark of the loft.

"My nerves are shot. I'll be glad when it's over," he said.

"It nearly is," she told him. "It nearly is."

There was a flat spot in Enoch Smith's field, all right.

Robideau got to Smith's farm a little past eight in the evening, found it a mile south of Rembrandt, population, very few. The farmyard was deserted. Quiet, if you didn't count the crickets kicking up a din along the highway. He beat on Smith's door. When no one came, he went looking for him about the farmyard. There were the usual vehicles and farm implements. The bones of rusting machinery, a grain auger aimed at the sky like a rocket launcher, several cords of firewood stacked along one wall of the barn.

There was an uncovered pail next to the firewood. The chief sniffed at it. Fuel oil. He grunted. "Here's a towering inferno waiting to start."

Part of a volunteer fire crew that had never lost a basement, the chief had been trained to notice such things.

The barn was one of those aged, ramshackle places farmers seemed to tolerate. Weathered grey wood, not a lick of paint. Robideau stood in its high open door and peered in. In the gloom he saw an open space to accommodate machinery, workbench along one wall with pegboard panels holding an assortment of tools. There was a smell of oil and grease. At one end of the workbench, oddly out of place, stood a lady's string bag with a bright design worked into it.

He heard a solid clunk somewhere above him. He looked up. There would be a loft, of course. But what had caused the clunk?

A staircase cobbled together out of rough wood led to the floor above. It groaned under his weight. He stepped out into a peaked, empty room with dark adjoining cubicles. Sunlight spilled in past a large open shutter. As he watched, the shutter swung shut on the breeze with a solid clunk.

Too bad all mysteries weren't so easily solved.

He went to the window, pushed back the shutter, and looked out.

It was a fine view, over a

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stand of firs and across Smith's fields, the wheat moving in waves, a golden sea stirred by the wind.

And a circle.

Robideau came alert. By God, there it was. Just as Smith had described. Some fifty yards out, just beyond the windbreak. Large, too, as Smith had claimed. A great flattened area. And though foreshortened somewhat by Robideau's line of sight, it was apparently perfectly circular.

Something else.

The chief squinted.

Something, at the center of the circle, dark on the flattened wheat. A crabbed shape that Robideau had seen before, usually at the scene of a tragedy.

He hurried down the stairs.

A trodden path left the farmyard between the barn and a steel equipment shed, and he struck off along it. Through the cool windbreak of tall spruces, the firs he had seen from above, to the edge of the wheatfield. A second path led into the field, less distinct, as if whoever made it had been at pains not to damage the crop—Smith, probably.

Robideau plunged on, careless of any damage he might do. He brushed the tall stalks aside and in a minute broke out into the flattened circle. Here the wheat was crushed to the ground, the stalks bent clockwise as if flattened by a stationary whirlwind. Robideau could see why Smith had been so angry.

But he wouldn't be angry any more.

The chief went to Smith's limp body and gently touched it. The body was still warm, but the man was certainly dead. The bullet that killed him had struck the back of his head and exited through his mouth, carrying away part of the jaw. He lay with his pointy-toed boots pointing east and west. No flames came out of those trouser legs now, just a pair of ankles.

Smith's bed rail biting days were over.

Going back to take a closer look at the string bag, Chief Robideau found that the damn thing was gone.

Mrs. Enoch Smith was like her husband, only shorter. She stood in the middle of Robideau's office and flung her arms around, yelling.

"This is *terrible!* You got to *do* something! It's *murder,* chief, *murder,* can't you get that through your head?" She began to sob. "My poor husband, lying there in Al Evans' back room. Next there'll be that awful machine. All those

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tubes stuck in him, pumping . . . I don't know what!"

"The best part of him," Robideau said.

"That's right. That's *exactly* right. And it isn't dignified. Worst of all, insult to injury, there's that horrible woman, that Madame Galamboski, bold as a brass bulldog, trotting around the town as if she owned it, sidewalks, street lamps, potholes, and all—"

"She can have the potholes," Robideau said.

"I want to know," Mrs. Smith sobbed, "how you can sit here, acting so calm and chewing that gum—"

"Rolaids," Robideau said, helping himself to another one out of his top drawer.

"—and that woman running loose, blood dripping from her hands, smirking. How can you do it, that's what I want to know!"

She glared at him. Tried to set fire to him with her eyes.

"If you're finished," he said, "it's my turn. I want to know something, too." He sat thoughtfully chewing his Rolaids. "Like why you're all of a sudden so hot to defend your husband's dignity when, so far as I can figure, you barely spoke to him the last five years."

It was as if she didn't know how to answer; she screwed up her face and started weeping again. The pain in the chief's stomach ratcheted up another notch.

"Easy for you," she sobbed, "in your big fancy office, with your big fat paycheck and your unlimited power, easy to ask mean, cruel questions of the tormented creatures dragged in here through no fault of their own—"

"Ma'am, if you don't mind, it was you wanted this meeting. And as for my fat paycheck and unlimited power, I'd swap 'em in a minute for a job tending bar at the Legion, and get a raise and a promotion out of the deal, if I only knew *how* to tend bar at the Legion, but since I don't, you're stuck with me."

"But you're not *doing* anything. That woman—"

"That woman, if she had anything to do with your husband's death, is going to wish she hadn't, I promise you that."

"But you only *sit* there—"

"Like a spider sits. Not the kind that spins webs like a TV detective, but the kind that watches till it sees what's what, and then pounces."

"But that woman—"

"And I won't be hurried."

Mrs. Smith stopped crying as if she'd turned off a switch, jumped up, and threw him another hard look, this one meant to knock him out of his chair.

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"I don't like telling you your job, Chief Robideau, but I will if I have to. I think you should arrest that woman for killing my husband. Deke thinks so, too—"

Robideau stared at her.

"Deke? Who's Deke?"

She hesitated, as if wishing she could take it back.

"If it's any of your business, which it isn't, Deke is my male friend from Lockport, and though you probably won't believe it, he's behind me one hundred percent on this." She went to the door, opened it, turned for a parting shot.

"Just you make sure and let me know when you need a witness to tell the world what a witch that woman is!"

The door slammed.

Chief Robideau stopped at home to get some Tums out of the medicine chest and stuff three in his mouth and the rest in his pocket.

Also to put his head into the kitchen to see if he could smell supper.

Nothing.

Mrs. Robideau, sitting at the table playing solitaire, said to the cards fanned out in her hand, "Maybe fishing is when you get paid fifty dollars for some extra work, security guarding, and then forget to show it on your tax return. Maybe that's what fishing is, I don't know."

The Netley was half deserted. Twenty people, maybe, at several scattered tables. The jukebox droned a Hank Williams, Jr., song, Hank exhorting one and all to get stoned. Spotting Chuck Lang and Wilmer Gates, Robideau made his way over to them. Old Wolverton was there, too, with his nose. And scowling Pete Melynchuk looking like a fight about to start.

"How she goin', chief?" Wilmer Gates asked. Good old Wilmer. World population spiraling out of control, and here was Wilmer, taking up space.

"Not too good for Enoch Smith," Robideau said. Pete slid a glass of draft beer in front of him. "You all heard what happened to him, I suppose?"

Heads bobbed. Rough hands rubbed unshaven faces.

"I don't suppose any of you got any idea who'd of shot that man? And for what reason?"

"Anyone *could* have," Pete Melynchuk said.

"And there's lots of reasons," Chuck Lang added.

"Okay," Robideau said. "Suppose you tell me."

"Well, putting his head in that door would be one."

Robideau sipped at the beer. He knew he shouldn't, but the

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way his week was shaping up, he didn't really care. He said to Chuck Lang, "Who the hell would kill Enoch Smith just for putting his head in the door?"

"I would," said Chuck matter-of-factly.

"So would I," Wilmer Gates said.

"So would I," Wolverton joined in.

"I'd of killed him for *thinking* about putting his head in that door," said Pete Melynchuk.

"So would I," Wolverton said.

Robideau shook his head. He wiped foam off his lips. "Let's get this straight. You guys are sitting here and telling me, the chief of police, you're a bunch of potential killers?"

"Nope."

"What do you mean, nope? You just did."

"We're reformed," said Chuck Lang. "We stopped being potential killers the minute that one-eighty grain slug went through Enoch's head and made a nicer man out of him."

"Oh," said Robideau, "a one-eighty grain, was it? You seem to know a lot about it."

Chuck Lang shrugged. "Just guessing it was his own gun got him. That's what he always bought. One-eighty grain Hi-Shoks for his Winchester .308. Mean gun. Muzzle velocity twenny-eight hunnerd, blow your head off."

"Blew *his* head off," grunted Pete Melynchuk.

"I'm happy to tell you know-it-alls that it blew his jaw off, not his head. Bullet only entered his head. Small round hole high up the back of his Massey Ferguson hat."

"Somebody sniped him, huh?"

"What?"

"Somebody sniped him, the way you're talking. From high up, and behind."

Robideau blinked at Chuck Lang. He hadn't thought of that. He'd imagined someone out at the circle with Smith, stopping, letting the big farmer walk on into the middle of it, then—boom!—letting him have it. He said obstinately, "Not necessarily. Killer could of been standing behind him. Someone he brought there to look at the circle. Smith looks up, tipping his head back. Killer shoots. Holes would line up then, all right."

But Chuck just sat there, shaking his bristly face. "Only way that could be is if Smith leaned all the way back and looked *straight* up. He wouldn't do that. Hurts like hell, you get our age." Robideau wanted to show he could do it, he didn't want these bums to think they'd told him something. "Besides," Chuck added, "a guy goes out to his

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field to see some freak circles, he'd be looking down, not up."

"Unless he's wondering what might of made those circles," Wilmer Gates reminded them.

"Lots in the news about them circles. Farmers got 'em, all over the world."

There was a lull. They pondered the mystery.

"I know . . . what made . . . those circles," Wolverton said. He spoke slowly, considering each word before he said it. "I seen it . . . on TV."

"Wolverton," Wilmer cackled, "I knew you weren't dead yet. Chuck here thought you were, and you wouldn't lie down. What'd you see? Tell us."

Wolverton drew a TV screen shakily in the air above the table. "Sky up here . . . ground underneath . . . "

"Jeez, thanks for clearing that up, Wove."

"Shut up," Pete Melynchuk snarled, "I wanna hear this."

Wolverton's finger moved. "Field here . . . on the ground. Up here . . . " He ran out of words. His finger made a small circle, settling.

"Flying saucer!" Wilmer yelped.

"No!" Wolverton shook his head vigorously. He leaned and said something into Chuck Lang's ear, then sat back and let Chuck relay the message.

"Wove says circles like that ain't made by flying saucers . . . "

Wolverton whispered again.

"He says—they're made by giant chocolates."

Laughter roared. Chuck said, "Well, there you go, chief. All wrapped up. Guy with a sweet tooth shoots Enoch Smith, loads that giant chocolate onto a flatbed, hauls her away. All you got to do now is find a guy with zits the size of beets, you got your man."

"A giant zit, walking, with a hat on it," Wilmer roared.

"Hell," Robideau said, disgusted, "I can see I won't get much help out of you bunch."

"If you want the one put Smith in the crosshairs, you won't get much more help out of anybody," Pete Melynchuk said. "Not in this town."

"Maybe," said Wilmer, smirking, "you could try another town."

"Yeah," put in Chuck, "like, I don't know, maybe Seattle."

"Or Vancouver," Wilmer said. "That's a nice town."

Pete Melynchuk said, "No, I think Albuquerque. I'd like to visit Albuquerque."

"You can visit it," Chuck told him, "but you can't spell it."

When Robideau walked out of the pub, he could hear their hoots and cackles echoing off the stucco walls.

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Still, his visit to the Netley hadn't been a total loss. The four bums had got him thinking. Chuck Lang was a lush and a fool, but he did know a lot about guns. He was right about the angle of trajectory. Basic stuff. Robideau should have been onto it right away himself, but hell, he wasn't one of those big city detectives couldn't go out the door without walking into a murder.

The trajectory, sure. There was only one place that bullet could have come from and messed up Enoch Smith the way it had.

The loft window.

The same window Chief Robideau himself had been standing at shortly after the shot was fired. The body still warm. He must have missed that killer by minutes.

Or—and here his stomach started its slow, familiar burn—the killer had still been there, lurking in one of those dark adjoining chambers while the chief was staring out the window.

He had to go back there. Up into that attic and see what he could find. Shell casings, maybe.

Had the bullet come from Smith's own rifle? Robideau had to find out.

When she saw him come in, Claudia Webb frowned at him as if she thought he had committed a crime himself.

He returned her glare.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter."

"I only got to look at your face, I can see something's the matter."

She shuffled papers. "You're the boss. I'm just a nobody. If anything's the matter, you'll tell *me*."

Robideau walked into his office, shook some Rolaids out into his pocket; it was a long drive out to the Smith place. He said over his shoulder, "You're not a nobody. So tell me, already. What's wrong?"

"I suppose," she said, "if you'd of had your pager with you, you'd of heard it beep and gone to a phone and found out for yourself."

God, his stomach hurt. Was he going to have to drive splinters under this woman's nails?

"Found out *what?*"

It was the last time he was asking. The positively last time.

"About the fire. I mean, here you are, one-sixth of the entire End of Main fire department, and if you don't carry your pager, it's got to be because you know they can handle any fire without any help from you."

He strode to her desk, leaned over it and roared, "Handle

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what? What? *What?"*

"Since you don't seem to know," Claudia Webb said, "Enoch Smith's barn burned down this afternoon."

Robideau stared at her a minute, blinked a few times, turned and went into his office and closed the door, and put his head down on his desk.

She said, "The barn went all right?"

He said, "It went fine. Just fine. After, I headed south on Highway 7, I could see it burn all the way to Meleb."

"What about the rifle?"

"I burnt it, too."

"And you got back the string bag?"

The fervor went out of his eyes.

"That bag wasn't there, where you said it'd be. Maybe you left it someplace else."

She stared at him. "No, I didn't leave it someplace else."

"Well, then," he said, "where the hell did it get to?"

They were silent a while, thinking. Finally he said:

"One thing's for sure, it's got to be somewhere."

"I mean, for Pete's sake, I was right there. I saw the fuel oil, I saw the woodpile. I stood in the loft minutes after the shot was fired. The killer must still have been there. I don't know what to think any more, this damn pain in my stomach all the time. Jeez, I wish Warren Radley was back. I shouldn't give him holidays. It isn't fair."

He had looked all through Smith's house for the rifle and couldn't find it. Even if he had, and found one bullet gone from the magazine, a smell of burnt powder, what would it prove? Nothing, if the lab couldn't lift any prints. As for the slug, that would be a shapeless mass, buried in the field. It wouldn't tell him anything.

"I think it's a fine thing, Warren having a vacation," Mrs. Robideau said to her husband without looking at him. "Get away from the people he has to put up with. Sightseeing, sunbathing . . . fishing."

"What's for supper?" Robideau snapped.

"You can have anything you want," Mrs. Robideau said. "Just so long as you clean up the kitchen when you're finished cooking and eating it."

"You know I can't cook."

"Do I? That's the first time you mentioned it. And here I always thought you were a four-star chef."

"You got any idea how much weight I'm losing?"

"And do *you* have any idea how much money Natty Ga-

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lamboski's losing since you smashed her business all to pieces? I feel just awful about it. I went to her place today, let her read my palm there at her kitchen table, and paid her a hundred dollars."

"What?" Pain sliced through Robideau's gut as if he'd been knifed. "I saw the sign on her wall. Palm-reading's only five dollars. You paid her a *hundred?"*

"That's right. It was the least I could do, seeing it was my own husband broke her door down and threw her customers out in the street. Poor thing. But don't worry. I took it out of the housekeeping money. You can just give me an extra hundred on payday."

"I can, huh? And what am I supposed to do for money?"

"You don't need it. You don't buy anything. Fishing licenses, nothing like that."

"Will you stop it, already, about the fishing licenses?"

"Too bad you took and went after Natty Galamboski, yelling and chasing her away. You could of had your palm read, asked her what expenses you got coming up. If she was still in business."

"If she was still in business, I wouldn't have to give you an extra hundred dollars."

"Well, I'm glad to see you've finally gotten that much through your head." Mrs. Robideau got up and went to the door. "Maybe there's hope for you yet."

"The only hope for me," Robideau said, "is to find that killer before someone else gets hurt."

"You could have asked my friend Natty that, too."

"Your friend Natty happens to be my prime suspect."

"More fool you, then," said Mrs. Robideau. And she went to the bedroom and closed the door.

Chief Robideau looked into the fridge and found a beer. He found a fistful of oatmeal cookies in the cookie jar, baked last week before the kitchen shut down, twisted the cap off the beer, and lined the cookies up in a row on the counter in front of him.

His stomach was heating up nicely by the time he washed down the first one.

"The thing was," he said, that familiar, tight creak of annoyance creeping into his voice, "we were just supposed to take care of the big guy, make it look like the witch *might* of done it, divert suspicion. That was the plan, and now look!"

"Well," she replied, trying to keep her own voice level and flat, "we couldn't have known that stupid policeman would come along when he did. And

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like you said, a high power bullet goes right through you, we could have dragged the body into the barn and burnt it down then and there, made it look like a total accident, if we'd wanted to."

He scratched his belly. "I'm not so sure. Sometimes, with fires, there's lots left over for 'em to search through, them experts and their fancy equipment. And then to go and burn the barn down anyway. Jeez. That barn was worth something, you know."

"Are we going to get into that again? I tell you, the barn had to go. Who knows what they could have found in it, those experts you're so scared of? Maybe a thread off your boot matching this carpet. And besides, that was his *special* place. I'm glad it's gone."

He got up, crossed the room scratching himself, came back and sat down again.

"We got to know where the string bag of yours got to."

"Don't worry. It was somewhere in that barn. I never took it into the house, I told you that."

"And if the policeman has it?"

"He couldn't. We watched him come out of the field. He was all excited about the body. Got right into his car and drove off. It must have slipped down behind something, that's all."

The telephone rang. He answered it gruffly.

She watched his frown deepen, the skin above his brow bunching up. He wound up staring at the telephone receiver; she could hear the click of someone hanging up from where she sat. "It was her," he said grimly. "That woman."

She gave her head a shake, puzzled.

"She phoned *here?* What did she want?"

"Says she found something belongs to you. Something important you'd like to have back. Full of your personal papers."

He was glaring at her.

"A string bag," he said.

Madame Galamboski put the telephone down. There. It was done. Two important calls. Now there was nothing to do but wait. She went to the big front window, pulled aside the curtain, and looked out. The back of the big CLOSED sign blocked half her view. Which way would *he* come? Along the street, certainly, as he did every other day, on his way to work.

And the other two?

No, they would not come by the front.

Creatures of Satan kept to shadows and secret places.

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She went out of the consulting room, through the kitchen to the back door, hooked the heavy plated chain through its slot, and slid the big bolt home. And then she thought, no, no, that's not what I really want, and forced her reluctant fingers to go back and unlock it again.

With a fluttering in her breast, unable to keep still, she went back and stood at her round consulting table. Took out her tarot cards, shuffled them. She liked the feel of the big cards in her hands, their glossiness, the pretty look of them. She fanned them out on the black cloth, face down. Should she tell a fortune for herself? She had not done that in a very long time. . . .

"I don't care what you say, I'm coming with you." Mrs. Robideau was gathering up her sweater, her purse—what did she need a purse for? Were they going to stop and do some shopping along the way? "Natty's a friend of mine. And she sounded scared. So I'm coming and that's that."

Chief Robideau watched her check for her keys, her wallet, her makeup mirror, and shook his head sadly. Mrs. Robideau would make an excellent Boy Scout; she was always prepared.

They went out together, and turned towards Burton Street.

Madam Galambosky left the twenty-two cards face down on the black cloth covered table, undisturbed. Admired their glossy backs, the twining serpents, the quarter-moons, the five-pointed stars pouring out of the clouded sky. But the card faces, no. She wasn't ready to look at those quite yet.

She peered out the window again, saw nothing, went and put her ear against the back door, listened, and heard nothing. She wondered what it was she ought to have done and hadn't done yet.

Oh, yes.

Quickly she stepped to the long row of tilted glass jars above the stove, her collection of herbal teas. Teas for the lovelorn, for the sick at heart, for the lost and bewildered, for the manic and depressed, teas from the corners of the world, she had them all, every one, here under large cork stoppers, ready.

Hurry. Fill the kettle with water, set it on the stove, switch on the heat. And the tea-ball, pop it open, set it down—there! Her fingers swiftly flying from jar to jar, plucking some of this, a little of that, a pinch of something else, packing all of it like an aro-

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matic nest into the teaball, quick, quick, quick!

And finally, from the rawhide thong at her hip, the key to the cupboards, ready. Slot it in, turn it, pull the cupboard door open.

Now.

These were the special herbs. Not for general consumption. Each one a power to be used in a special way, for a special purpose, stored away as securely as a pharmacist stores his own most potent wares. Nothing deadly. No, she would never keep anything deadly around. But powerful?

Oh, yes.

The kettle shrieked. She poured the water. Took out three cups and some lemon loaf. Sat down at the kitchen table, waiting and watching and listening to the door.

And then it came.

The creak she had been expecting. Second step from the bottom, nail heads rusted, two cracks left to right, squeaked the whole year she'd been here, still squeaked today.

The step squeaked twice.

And there now. Look. The door knob turning, slowly, slowly, not making a sound. A shiver went down her back. What would they do? Please let them talk first. They *must* talk first.

A click, the door opened, and here they were, peering in at her.

Madame Galamboski tried to keep her voice even.

"I knew you'd come," she said. And trying not to seem too hopeful, "I've got tea. And some lovely lemon loaf."

Mrs. Smith's new man —Deke, was that his name? —took a step towards her, swelling like a bomb about to explode, but Mrs. Smith stopped him, saying:

"All right. So you have the bag. And you called us here. That means you know something." She came closer, a tall shadow looming. A hard woman. And strong. Strong enough to pick Madame Galamboski up and throw her out the window. "Just how much *do* you know? Tell me!"

"I—I was out at the farm myself, that day."

"What day?"

"The day you . . . left the string bag."

"Hell's bells. A barnyard convention. You, Enoch, us, the dumb cop. Might as well have put a notice in the paper. So you were there. What of it?"

"Well, I watched what went on." Madame Galamboski got up, took the teapot off the stove, slipped a cosy over it and brought it to the table, poured out three cups, and sat down again. She pushed the lemon

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loaf on its carving board out to the middle of the table.

The man named Deke eyed it hungrily. "Hey," he said, "you need a knife for that." And he reached into the drawer Madame Galamboski had foolishly left partway open and brought out a large, sharp knife. He cut a slice of lemon loaf, stuffed it into his mouth, and put the knife down, clack! in front of Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Smith picked up her tea, then set it down again. "Hot," she said.

"It's best when it's hot," Madame Galamboski said. And not wanting to seem too anxious, added quickly, "I suppose it was you playing pranks on Enoch all that time, things that would make him suspect it was me."

"That part was easy," Mrs. Smith's friend said.

"But why?"

"Why not? I wanted that farm back. Not half of it—all of it! You were partly to blame, Enoch taking you in so quick after I'd gone. So I thought, fair is fair, kill him, blame you, I get the farm, everybody's happy."

"That's—that's terrible," Mrs. Galamboski said.

"I'm not finished yet, being terrible," Mrs. Smith said.

"Can't you walk faster?" Mrs. Robideau asked.

"I'm walking," the chief said, "like one of them crosscountry racers, the kind move their hips like Hawaiian hootchy dancers. My feet are off the ground, both at the same time."

"All I know is, you're the one usually leaving me behind. Now I feel like I'm dragging along a sack of wet sand," she snapped.

"A man has to eat to be good at athletics."

"Okay. Get the lead out of your socks, and I'll feed you soon as we get home."

"Yeah? Pirogies with onions?"

"All right."

"Brownies for dessert?"

"Microwave kind. You got 'em."

"I'm traveling now. Clear the track."

Deke swallowed another hunk of cake and found his mouth getting dry. He reached for his tea. And he gave Liz a nudge, make her stop talking, get down to business. She glanced at him, saw him with the teacup, and, misunderstanding, found her own cup and picked it up.

"You must think you're pretty darn cute," Liz said to the witching woman, "seeing everything, sitting on it all this time."

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She warmed her hands around the cup. "Why didn't you just take it to that dope Robideau?"

"Well . . . "

"Wanted a piece of the action, didn't you?"

"Well . . . "

Liz put the cup down and said, "I guess you think you earned it, putting up with that brute yourself for awhile. But let me tell you, sister, you got another think coming about *that.*"

"Uh . . . sugar with your tea?" Madame Galamboski asked.

"I'm sweet enough already," Liz snapped.

Deke raised his cup of tea and drank it. Not as hot as it could be. He drank the rest of it off in one swallow. Seated at the table across from the witching woman, Liz did the same.

"Okay," Deke said, "if this chinwag is over, let's get down to it." He flexed his fingers.

"You're right, Deke," Liz said. And then, explaining to the witching woman, "Deke's always right about these things."

Deke leaned across the table, reaching, and a strange thing happened. The room got longer. Oh, yes, it did. As if some giant on the outside of the house had taken a grip on it and pulled it like a rug, and doing that, dragged the witching woman away. Deke knew what was happening. The woman was witching them. Waggling her witchy fingers under the table, maybe. Muttering a magic murmur.

Well, he'd have to concentrate, that's all. But now the tiny wooden table had stretched to twenty feet across, now thirty, now forty, growing as he watched. He looked down at Liz, and she stared back. A face he didn't know, twisted like taffy. She said something, and her words groaned like a record player slowed by a thumb. She seized his arm to pull herself up, and her fingers were all knuckles and bones!

Don't think on it, he told himself. It's a spell. Get the witching woman, that's all, and it'll stop.

But the witching woman wasn't on the other side of the table any more, she was coming out around it, climbing the room, which was warping and lifting at one corner. The walls leaned in, and he waited for a row of fancy jars on the wall to crash to the floor, but they stayed where they were, glued in place.

The woman kept moving. Liz was going after her. She had the cake knife in her hand, it looked far too long, and it curved like a scythe. There was

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a crash as Liz knocked a kitchen chair over.

Liz groaned again in her slow-speed voice, and it sounded like "ooop-stooors." The witching woman was heading for the staircase.

He knew the room was small. Take one step and intercept her. But when he told his feet to move, they stayed put, two big black boats on the floor—see, there was the rigging, his shoelaces.

So he took a step without them, fell, and bashed his head on the stove.

Clong! Oh, Jeez! That hurt!

Best to stay down. He crawled into the hallway, which was still tiny but a thousand feet tall, saw the stairs going up forever, to the top of the world, maybe the moon, handrails meeting, way up there, like train tracks.

Nothing moved on them.

Where was the woman? Damn, if the world would only stand still! Hah! He saw her. She hadn't snuck past him after all. Here she was, crawling like he was to the bottom stair. He scrunched his eyes shut, gritted his teeth, and grabbed her.

He held tight. His weight took her down. He didn't have to see her too well. All he had to do was hold onto her scrawny neck that was about, say, two feet long and an inch thick, hold on good and hard and *squeeeeze!* And try to ignore the bee stings that kept pricking, pricking, pricking into his side.

Madame Galamboski heard the terrible shrieking but she didn't go down. Not yet. She wouldn't even go to the head of the staircase and look. Not until she heard Chief Robideau's big, booming voice shake the chinaware in the kitchen.

Then she unlatched her bedroom door.

Mrs. Robideau rushed in and hugged her.

"Don't go downstairs yet, dear," Mrs. Robideau said, "it's just terrible."

"What . . . "

"You don't want to know. It's awful. Just awful. They must of come here to get you, then got into a scrap. He choked her, she stabbed him, there's blood from here to Christmas, and you don't want to see it. Mr. Robideau's getting it all straightened away, he's on the phone this minute."

Madame Galamboski took all this in, thought about the string bag, the shot she'd heard in the barn, the fire, the cups of tea, and then she collapsed into Mrs. Robideau's arms, sobbing.

"There, there," Mrs. Robideau said, "nothing's gone wrong my husband can't fix. By

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the way, what do you recommend for acid stomach?"

They stood in Madame Galamboski's front room. The CLOSED sign was gone from the window, the hag scowled out of her coin-slot box, and the skull (surely it was plastic!) grinned a welcome to the street.

"I can't thank you for all you've done," Madame Galamboski said.

Mr. and Mrs. Robideau shrugged and looked embarrassed.

"Thank *you,*" the chief told her, "that herb you gave me sure helps my stomach a lot. What d'you call it?"

Madame Galamboski smiled. "Meadowsweet. One infusion, three times daily. Wormwood is good also. But listen, I am pleased to do something for you, now my shop is open again, and with a license, too." She winked at Robideau. "You big bad man, you had something to do with that."

"Well, I might of reminded some people of some favors they owed me. And you were risking a lot for the town."

"Yes," she said, "a voice called to me, 'Take the string bag to Chief Robideau.' But, you see, I could not do that. The string bag, I could have found it somewhere, I could have stolen it from their car. No. I had to use it to get more evidence."

"So you set a trap for them?" Mrs. Robideau asked.

"No. Not a trap. But I knew they would be unpleasant when they came to visit me. I wanted your husband to witness it."

"You took a big chance, a *very* big chance."

She smiled. "Chance is something I know about."

"I guess you do at that."

The chief wanted to know if Deke and Mrs. Smith had said, before they died, just how they'd made the circle in the field.

Madame Galamboski shook her head. "That is a strange thing. They told of many nasty tricks they played on Enoch at the farm, but they swore they did not make that circle."

Robideau nodded. Liars. Of course they'd made it. It was the only explanation made sense, unless you wanted to believe the one put forward by Wolverton.

Madame Galamboski crossed to her consulting table where a fan of cards lay on the black cloth, boldly plucked one out, and turned it over, left to right. She looked up at them, smiling.

"Judgment," she said. "Right way up, as it ought to be."

They wished Madame Galamboski the best of luck, let her press another bag of mead-

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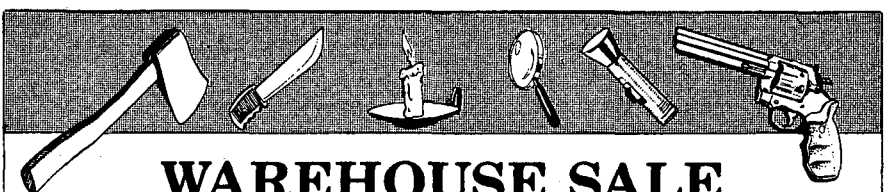
owsweet on them, then they went down the steps to the street. Mrs. Robideau said:

"You're actually drinking those infusions?"

"Well . . . " He hedged. "Actually I fortify 'em with a few Tums and Rolaids. But don't tell on me."

Mrs. Robideau sniffed.

"I haven't told on you about your fishing, have I? Yet!"



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UNSOLVED

by

Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the Mid-December issue.

Five county jails—including the one in which Deputy Bennett works—for the first time in a long while are not filled to capacity with miscreants.

None of the county jails is large (two of them have only six cells), but by housing two prisoners to a cell they are able to double their capacity.

From the clues below, can you determine the sheriff and deputy of each county jail, the number of cells in each jail, and the current number of prisoners each jail is holding?

NOTE: No sheriff shared an initial with either his deputy or the county in which he was sheriff; neither did any deputy share an initial with the county within which he worked.

1. The two jails with the most cells (eight) were in Benton County and the county where Adams was sheriff.

2. Deputy Dixon, who did not work in Canton County, was in charge of ten prisoners, the same number for which the deputy in Anton County was responsible.

3. Sheriff Dawson, whose deputy was not Edwards, had more prisoners than the sheriff of Eaton County, who had nine.

4. Sheriff Casey (not of Denton County) had a jail larger than Sheriff Bailey's (whose deputy was not Allen) but smaller than Sheriff Eames's.

5. The county jail with the fewest cells (half the size of the Benton County jail) was one prisoner short of capacity and had five fewer prisoners than the number Deputy Clark was responsible for.

See page 148 for the solution to the November puzzle.

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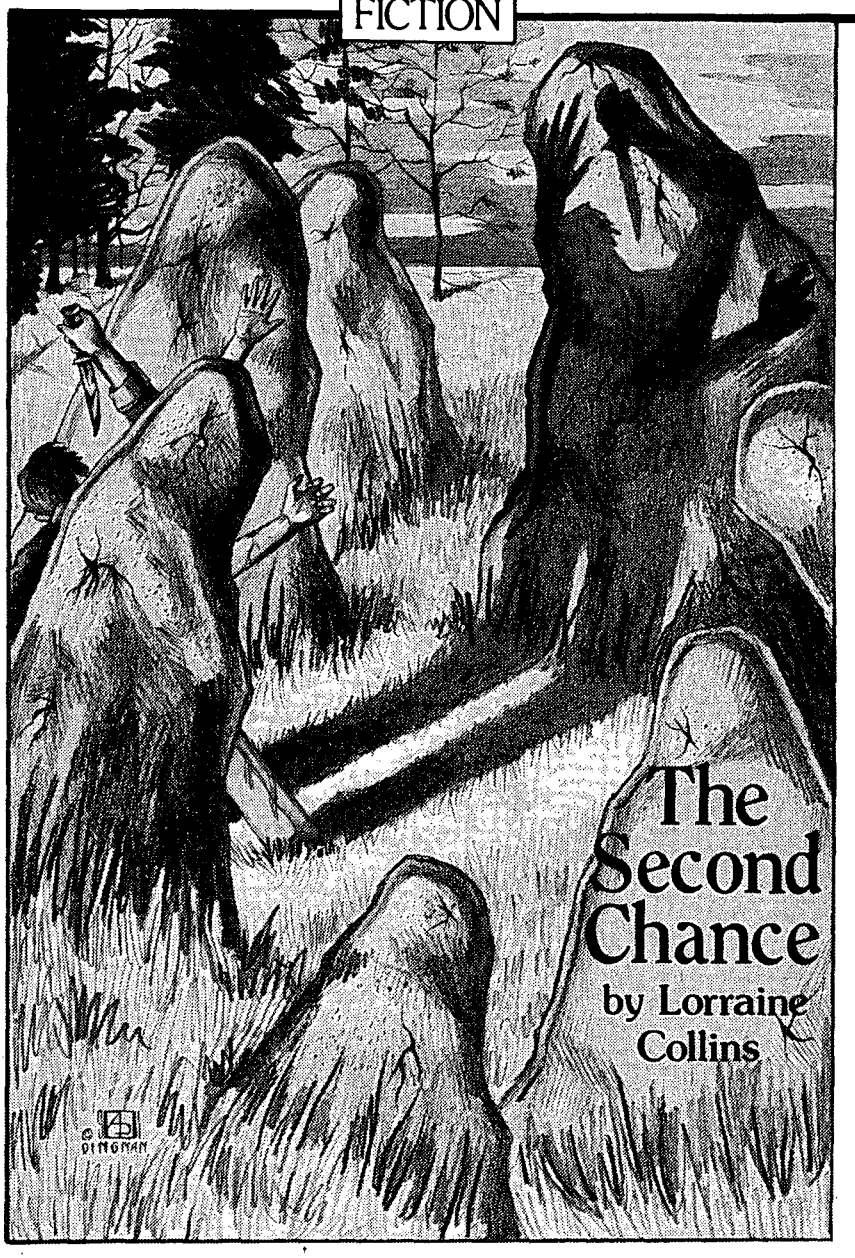
FICTION



The Second Chance

by Lorraine Collins

Illustration by Alan Dingman

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The stone circle was much smaller and more obscure than Stonehenge or Callanish. It was indicated on the Ordnance Survey map by just three tiny dots off to the side of a country road that wound its way through the high, grass-covered hills of Derbyshire. A visitor might be discouraged by the narrow, deeply rutted track that seemed to wander off toward a hayfield with no particular purpose, but eventually there was a battered white metal sign next to a wood fence. It pointed up a broad hill and promised, "Stone Circle, 3/4s Mile." Henry Mason knew it was farther than that.

He managed to find enough room to park his hired Fiat between the fence and the road and was able to open the door enough to get out. The small car hardly suited his lanky frame, but his wife had taken the Vauxhall when she suddenly announced that she needed to get away to "think things over." More than two weeks ago, now.

The grass by the road was almost knee high and was wet from the latest spring shower. It had been a beautiful day, but now a cold wind had come up and clouds were gathering again in the west. It would be dark within an hour.

When he'd locked his car, he pulled a cap from his pocket and put it on, turning his coat collar up. He hesitated, looking at the sky and wondering what impulse had made him stop here. Surely, he didn't need to be reminded of one more failure in his life. But he climbed the stile to walk up the footpath, managing a grim smile when he thought how odd it was—a policeman, returning to the scene of a crime.

More than one crime. Three brutal, bloody murders four years before, and the killer never found.

How sensational it was—how the press loved it.

He was surprised by the serenity of this place now, as though the eternal hills had remained untouched by the thundering droves of television reporters, policemen, thrill-seekers that had swarmed over the place four years before. A few sheep grazed peacefully in the distance, and from far away there was the sound of a church bell.

He walked with his head down, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, not watching where he was going, so when he neared the top of the hill and looked up, the stone circle appeared almost as a surprise. It was in front of the thick grove of trees, just at the top of the

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hill sixty yards away. He stopped to look at it.

From the distance, the dark gray rocks standing upright in the ancient monument looked rather dainty, ladylike, by stone circle standards. Most weren't more than three or four feet high, and some seemed to lean toward the center, like ladies putting their heads together, gossiping. They were called the Seven Sisters.

The first body had been found right in the center of the circle. Her throat had been cut, and the press had jumped onto the idea of the resurgence of an ancient cult, druids, the sacrifices of virgins. The second woman was found a month later, more than a mile away, and the third in another month was farther still. But the killings were all the same, no doubt of it, so the press dubbed the killer the Seven Sisters Slasher. It was speculated that there would be four more deaths before he was finished.

As he walked slowly toward the circle, Mason began to realize that something was wrong. There was something there, by the largest stone, on the far side. His pulse quickened, and a feeling of dread overtook him. He walked faster, almost breaking into a run, all the while telling himself no, it couldn't be, it couldn't.

When he got to the circle, he stopped suddenly, riveted to the ground by cold shock. Lying in front of the largest stone, on her back, was a woman—a middle-aged woman dressed in a tweed skirt and light jacket, thick stockings and sturdy shoes, with a plastic carrier bag still hung over one arm. Her head was tilted back, and her mouth hung open. She looked peaceful, she looked unmolested, but she was dead.

"On holiday is it, inspector? Just happened to stumble across the dead body of a woman on holiday? Busman's holiday, eh?" The local chief constable, a rosy-cheeked, strawhaired, youngish man named George Woodbridge, wasn't really trying to make a joke. He seemed self-conscious, nervous, and very uncertain of himself. He just couldn't stop chattering away.

Woodbridge had not been involved four years before. The chief at the time had taken early retirement after the failure and fiasco of that investigation. Now Woodbridge looked at Mason over his pint of bitter and said, "You were up here from London then, weren't you? On those cases?"

Mason nodded, glancing

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around the empty and dreary bar of The Bull. The pub was the nearest point of civilization—if you could call it that—to the stone circle, but it had little else to recommend it, being a cold pile of gray stone perched on a windswept hill with no trees within a mile.

"Yes, a few of us were up here for a while. Until there suddenly didn't seem to be any more killings to investigate, and our inquiries weren't leading us anywhere."

"Well, inspector, do you think we're in for another go-round, then?"

Mason shook his head. "Everything is different. For one thing, she's a good twenty years older than those other victims were. She wasn't—uh—molested, or cut—"

Woodbridge took out a piece of paper, glancing at it. "'Cause of death isn't certain yet, but there's a nasty contusion on the back of her head. Her name is May Parker, by the way. Spinster, fifty-seven years old, retired from the village post office. Been missing for two days, probably. That is, no one in the village has seen her for two days, but then no one particularly *does* see her."

"Any ideas why she might have been up by the Seven Sisters?"

"Well—a lot of locals avoid it since that trouble, you know, but it's a shortcut to Brownlee Farms. She had a friend, Marsha Twigg, who keeps house for the old gent there. Sometimes Miss Parker would hike over to see Twigg, just visiting, sharing a new purchase with her, that sort of thing."

"Was she expected two days ago?"

"No, but she often went unannounced."

Mason sat at the small table in the pub, looking out the leaded glass windows at the windswept hillside. It was raining again. It had rained in the night—he'd been awake most of the night in his narrow bed upstairs at The Bull—and it seemed the weather had taken a decided turn for the worse.

He was thinking of May Parker, lying out there on the hilltop in the middle of the circle for two days until he came along to find her. Why was she put there, lying as though in a coffin, her arms folded, her legs stretched out—

He remembered her shoes. They were new. Very new. No mud, no sign they'd ever been worn.

The box for her new shoes was still in her carrier bag, empty.

Mason frowned. "Woodbridge, can you think of any reason why, when he laid her

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out like that, the killer would steal May Parker's old shoes and put her new shoes on her feet?"

Woodbridge was standing in the center of the Seven Sisters, staring morosely back toward the path from the road. "So, inspector, you were alone, on your way to the Lake District, and just decided to stop by here?"

Mason glanced at him. "Alone, yes." He hesitated. "Separate holidays this year."

"Umm. Do you always stop at—"

"No." There was no reason he needed to explain himself to Woodbridge or anyone else. Including himself? He'd stopped because he had been remembering how things were four years before. Four years ago, for instance, he'd thought he had a happy marriage. Four years ago, he thought his brilliance was unarguable, his career at Scotland Yard established.

They thought they had a notion who the Slasher might be—not a name to him, yet, but a profile. He would turn out to be a man twenty-two to twenty-seven, living alone or with one other person who intimidated and abused him, and he probably lived on a farm or in another rural setting. He was strong, but unskilled. He was a loner—no friends, no girlfriends. They had counted on the psychological profile as much as the physical evidence to help find him. They'd begun a search through computer files, started drawing circles on maps to find such a man within the area. Henry Mason was in charge of that project. He was going to make his reputation with this case. But just as everything was geared up, the killings stopped.

Was he relieved, or disappointed? Mason had never asked himself that question before.

"I suppose," Woodbridge said, mirroring Mason's thoughts, "we'll never know who the Slasher was now. Rather like Jack the Ripper. The killings stopped when he died. The Slasher must be dead, don't you think?"

Mason nodded. "The file is still open. But we don't spend any time on it any more. Other priorities now."

Mason turned to look at Woodbridge. Something was still nagging at the back of his mind. "Woodbridge, why was May Parker's body laid out like that, in the stone circle? Why put her out there in plain sight, waiting for her to be found?"

"Well—"

"Most killers try to hide their victims, try to keep us from

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knowing about a murder. So why didn't the killer hide the body, bury it in those woods?"

"You think you know?"

"Perhaps—a guess. If May Parker's friend Mrs. Twigg had been expecting her, if she knew she would come this way, you'd have searched this whole area when she disappeared, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yes—"

Mason's eyes were alight, and he was almost smiling when he said, "Woodbridge, I suspect that May Parker was put out here to keep you from looking for her."

The chief constable had been reluctant at first, but he agreed to call some men to start searching the woods. Mason's argument made sense in a way. He thought May Parker was on her way to see Mrs. Twigg, to show her the new shoes, that she'd seen or heard something that she shouldn't have, and been killed because of it. Whatever she discovered, it might still be there. Most probably in the woods, since there obviously wasn't anything hidden on that barren hilltop.

"Either she lost her shoes somehow in that tangle in there, or the evidence they had on them—dirt, leaves, whatever—would give away the fact she'd been in there, so the killer took them," Mason insisted. "Search the woods along the path from here to Brownlee Farm, two hundred feet on either side to begin with. That's about as far as she could have seen anything this time of year, don't you think? We've been assuming that she was killed at the circle, or between there and the village. But she could have been hauled back up to the circle from the other side."

They found the shoes within an hour, snagged in a tangle of gooseberry bushes, one a couple of yards from the other. They were worn, shabby, obviously ill-fitting shoes, run over at the heels, with broken and knotted shoestrings.

"See here," Woodbridge said, kneeling by the bushes that had been crushed and matted. "She was dragged through here, I expect. Lost her shoes." He stood up. "Not much of a trail left, but we'll find it. Look closely, lads. This trail will lead somewhere if we don't lose it."

Marsha Twigg's eyes widened in surprise when she opened the kitchen door to see the chief constable. Martin Brownlee, a large, muscular man with ruddy face and white hair, looked up from where he sat at the kitchen table, eating. Woodbridge came through the

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door first, followed by a uniformed constable and then Henry Mason. In the instant before anyone spoke, Brownlee looked from one man to another, and then he leaned back in his chair.

"So you've come, then."

Marsha Twigg moved back to brace herself against the counter top. "What?"

"We've found a grave in your woods, just over there, Mr. Brownlee," Woodbridge said.

"Damned woman. It'll all come out now."

"Yes, I hope so," Mason said.

"I did what was best for everybody."

"Perhaps, Mr. Brownlee, until recently."

"He said his son was over in Canada. Said he got letters from him all the time." Marsha Twigg stopped to wipe her eyes, and twisted about in the chair in front of Woodbridge's desk. "May told me she didn't think so. May said she'd never seen a letter from Canada for Mr. Brownlee in all the time she'd been in the post office. But it made no difference to me. Mr. Brownlee raised that boy all by himself, he did, after his wife died. I know he was harsh, but the boy needed it, you know? And then when he went off to Canada, a while later, Mr. Brownlee asked me to come and do for him, and I did. Oh, he had a temper, but I never believed—I never thought—"

"Of course you didn't," Mason nodded sympathetically.

"To kill his own son! Even if he was the—the—"

Woodbridge got up from behind his desk to lead Mrs. Twigg gently to the outer room of the small police station and find a constable to drive her to the railway station. She was going to visit her sister for a while.

Henry Mason sat by the desk, glancing through the report he and Woodbridge had put together. Martin Brownlee's son Herbert fit the psychological profile perfectly. There was that much satisfaction, at least. They'd found his name on the computer lists back at Scotland Yard, but there was the notation that he'd been in Canada when the killings occurred. Somehow that was never checked out, and when the killings stopped, it was just one more detail lost in the hundreds of pages of information.

When Brownlee discovered that his son was the killer the entire country was looking for, he apparently never hesitated. He'd punished his son brutally many times before, and this was just the final punishment

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for the worst of his misdeeds. He killed him and buried him there in the woods and invented the story about Canada.

It was pretty obvious from Brownlee's statement that the old man was beginning to run off the rails himself. He had taken to visiting the secret grave, talking to his son, telling him all the things he'd done wrong, blaming him for ruining his life, bringing shame to the family. But still, he made a marker for the grave, and began tending it.

He was there when May Parker happened to come by, hearing him rave at his son, and she went into the woods to see what was happening. When he saw her, he struck her as swiftly as he had his son.

Woodbridge came back into the office, and Mason stood up, tossing the folder on his desk.

"Well, then, inspector, going on with your fishing trip now?"

Mason shook his head. "Back to London, I think. There might be a few—a few other things to tidy up."

Woodbridge looked surprised.

"I see. Well, we're very grateful for your help. Rather a good thing to get a second chance at solving the Slasher case, eh? Never too late."

Mason nodded, but he was thinking it was too late for May Parker. Still—it was too soon to hope, probably—but there might be a second chance for a few other things in his life, too. He'd try to make sure it wasn't too late.

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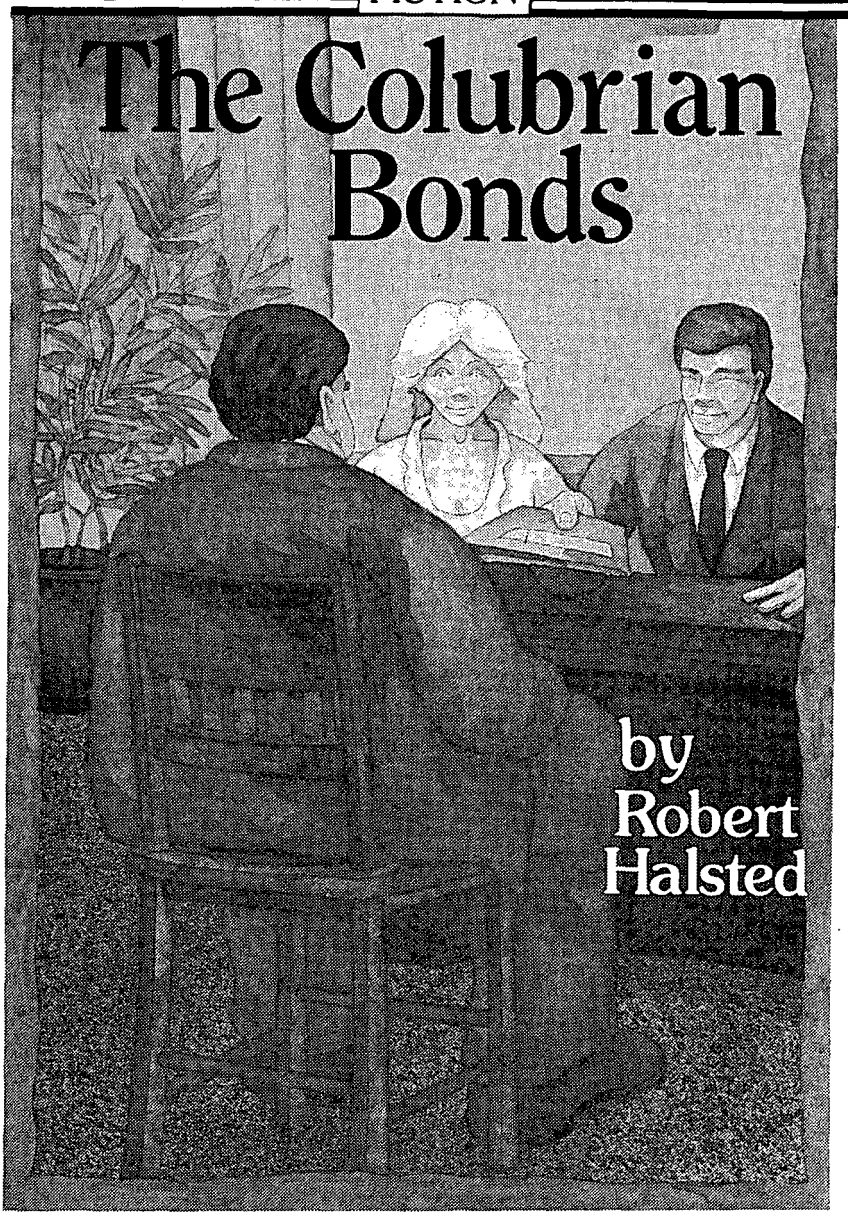
FICTION

The Colubrian Bonds



by Robert Halsted

Illustration by Jim Adams

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"Gimme a dollar," I said to Joy Sue.

She reached under the desk for her purse, pulled out a dollar bill and started to hand it to me, then stopped herself. "Jessa minute," she said in the broad Appalachian she used for horse-trading and such. "Ah'm not so sure you're that good a credit risk. You jus' pulled a million dollar scam, and you've already got to borry from a pore workin' girl?"

I cleared my throat brusquely. "You may remember that particular poor working girl undermined the whole project and left us practically penniless—"

"We ain't penniless. We own more'n a hunnert thousan' shares of Minicorp stock, which we could sell off, now the dust is settled, for a windfall of *more'n* a million."

"Hm, well, anyhow. I'm not borrowing, I'm selling you something."

"I'd hafta see it first."

I picked up the blue-covered document from the desk and handed it to her. She opened it and scanned it page by page.

"Hmm," she commented, getting up and coming around the desk to my chair. " 'Splain this part to me."

I looked at it. "That. Well, that just says, in effect, that I'm senior partner and you're junior partner. I own two-thirds of whatever real or imagined value the firm has, and you own the other third. And we can sell portions of the ownership, to each other or to an outsider, by mutual agreement. You could offer me a price for one sixth, and we'd be fifty-fifty partners. You could buy me out, I could buy you out."

"Wootn do me no good, me buyin' you out less'n I had a licen." I'd never thought of that before. Singular, licen. Plural, license.

"Right. One reason I'm senior partner is that I have the license. Another is that I invented the firm and paid for it."

"But Ah could own the firm an' hire somebody with a licen to run the erran's, like sellin' stocks and bonds and lookin' up thaings."

I stopped feeling guilty about luring a poor ignorant hillbilly child away from her native home. And decided to make it a point to sign up for an upcoming seminar in business law. "If you want to make me an offer, I'll give it the consideration it deserves. Right now, all I'm trying to do is give you a third of my hard-earned business for practically nothing. Don't ask me why."

Joy Sue tapped my knee with her knuckles till I put both feet on the floor, then sat on my lap.

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She had a natural talent for the executive secretary role. It seemed almost a shame to waste her on a partnership.

She wiggled till she was settled right, then flipped back to the first page. "Ah don't p'tic'ly truss this part right here. Where it says, 'For one dollar and other valuable considerations.' What's these 'other valu'ble considerations'?"

"That's just legal talk. It means I'm only declaring a dollar as income from the purchase price but that other factors enter in."

"Such as?"

"Well, such as your loyalty to the firm, your natural talent for the business, ah, personal good will between us . . ." I realized I'd been patting the fleshy part of her hip, and I let my hand drop.

"What if we decide there ain't that much good will after all?"

For some reason I felt the sensation of a dull knitting needle in the left side of my chest. "Well, if it meant we couldn't work together, one of us would be well advised to buy the other out. If it were just a . . . depreciation of affection, so to speak, we might—uh— reduce personal contact and still have a profitable business relationship."

"You sure this all ain't just a plot to 'sploit my innocent femininity?" She looked me close in the eye, searching for the truth of my motivation.

"Heavens, no. I never exploit an unwilling victim."

"I gotta be willin'?"

"Mm-hmm."

Joy Sue can put more *girl* into a simple five minute kiss than others I've known can manage through cocktails and dinner till breakfast the next morning. We spent the sixth minute getting our breath back. Then she gave me the dollar, took the lipstick off my face and put some back on hers, and we went out to the reception lobby to get Ms. Cortinho, the head receptionist, to witness our signatures.

Joy Sue read the front section while I browsed through the financial pages, wondering how big a damn fool I had been and was being. There was something irresistible there that scared us both, and we had to retreat from time to time. Though we kept doing things to reinforce the danger.

"Well, if he's *that* bad," she exclaimed suddenly, hitting the paper with her fingertips, "why don't they jus' get *rid* of him?"

"Get rid of whom, darling?" The "darling" was meant to put some distance between us, but

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it didn't come out sounding that way.

"This ol' General Padrastro, over there in wherever it is."

It took a moment for the reference to register on me. "Oh. Down in Colubria." Don't look for it in your atlas. I took my code name for the place from a zoology book.

"Yeah, *there*. He's killin' his own folks, and torturin' 'em an' all. Takin' their farms away an' puttin' 'em in the army."

That sounded more or less like the normal functions of government to me, but I could see her point. "Well, if you can figure a way to get rid of tinpot dictators, we've got a valuable product on our hands. We can open a consultancy and get rich. Legally, I mean."

"Well, there muss be *some* way." She glowered at the paper for a while, then reached for the back section. I always read the comics page after she'd finished it, mostly to see what kind of original approach she used on the crossword puzzle from day to day.

We had been frighteningly legitimate for a good while. I had a sort of sinking feeling in my entrails, not so much that I was losing my nerve or my touch as that I was coming to enjoy making the legal dollar.

Actually, there were a lot of good reasons for our not setting up any new creative ventures right then.

For one thing, we had developed an overnight reputation for genius, witchcraft, or what have you as a result of the Minicorp caper. They knew we'd made a killing by plunging at just the moment Minicorp bottomed out, and they knew that my innocent hillbilly executive secretary, now junior partner, was somehow on the inside of it.

Most of the pros had partly figured it out, that our plunging had been the trigger for the rally, though they still believed we had inside dope. Which in a way we did, having paid for printing the shares that caused all the trouble in the first place. The buffs and hacks, though, those gentle sheep in wolves' clothing whose fleece keeps the industry soft and warm for the commission agents, were still operating on the *prae hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy (surviving classics scholars, read that one closely), attributing our investment to the coming price rise instead of vice versa.

Nobody, we hoped, had figured out or ever would figure out that Joy Sue had inadvertently begun the upswing with her quixotic gesture of trying to bail out Minicorp after we'd more or less wrecked it with

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the fake shares we'd used to fleece Ulfsen while scuttling his takeover.

Whatever they did or didn't know, our mystique had them knocking at our door with all the business the two of us could handle, and we weren't about to hire somebody who might wrongly come to the right conclusion about certain of our other activities. So we labored and suffered, taking our one and a half points off the top of the couple of million or so a month we were brokering.

Mostly, though, we really didn't want to do anything to attract the attention of the IRS, SEC, several SCC's or any vengeful Ulfsenites. So we played it straight.

Then there was another factor. My willingness to risk prison or homicide, having to skip to Brazil or radically alter my identity, was much reduced. I began to experience a deep and kindred sympathy for those who settled into a rut because they were saddled with pets, wives, children, and such. While I had none of the above, Joy Sue seemed to be a good all-round substitute.

Our completed partnership paperwork finally trickled in—our lawyer figures he's justified in charging a fat fee if he takes three weeks to do a thirty minute job, but then he's one of the better ones—and we began expanding our office space. A vacancy had come up right beside us, so all we had to do was get the management to knock a hole in the wall and redecorate around it. Joy Sue had some decorating ideas which, subjected to my civilizing influence, weren't half bad. The place began looking less like a bachelor's hobby and more like a going business.

We were getting ready to move into our new apartment at the same time. That situation would have confused an outsider. It certainly confused me. I even wondered at moments if Joy Sue, whose show it was, didn't have moments of uncertainty about her own definitions.

Her official position was that it was her apartment but since I was paying for it I had a right to live there. Then, when she got to the drawing pictures on graph paper stage, she put my kingsize in the master bedroom, knowing I went with it. The problem was, we both agreed we needed space to get away from each other, but when we had it, nobody would have noticed our using it.

While all this was going on, naturally, the Mysterious Caller chose to manifest

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himself.

He phoned one morning, calling himself Meester Smeeth, told me he was calling at the large distance, and requested an appointment the coming Friday to discuss a confidential bond issue arrangement. I set him up for mid-morning, gave him the address of our office, and scribbled a note for Joy Sue.

Ordinarily I didn't get involved in new issues, except those I informally created and issued myself, but I was credentialed for the job and in a way more experienced at it than some corporate execs. I deedn't particularly like Meester Smeeth's oily voice and decided to demand a top consultation fee up front.

Joy Sue was still obsessed with Colubria. It must have reminded her of Dooleymont politics or something. This morning, during a lull, she was gloating at the front page.

"Well, aleast we ain't *payin'* 'em no more to do what they been doin'." You could tell she was emotionally involved by the depth of her dialect, subtly different from her innocent, manipulative one.

"Paying whom for what, and who is 'we'?"

"That ol' Padrastro an' his crowd. For doin' what they're doin' down there. An' it's *us* was payin', our *tax* dollars!" She had taken the tax situation very seriously after helping me do the quarterly return. Her fingers had trembled as she made out the check for me to sign, giving Uncle Sam several grand and small change for whatever he was doing for us, like subsidizing General Padrastro. And that was just on our legal income.

I took the paper and read the lead story. The House, after being deluged with citizen protests, had voted down an emergency foreign aid bill to bail Padrastro out of the hole he'd dug himself into by buying swords with his ploughshare money. The CIA and the State Department had sent lobbyists to convince the legislators that maintenance of the dictatorship in a hundred-mile-square country two thousand miles away was essential to our survival as a free and democratic nation. They hadn't been allowed to speak on the floor, of course, but they had buttonholed a lot of representatives in the cloakroom and had one of their own, a Texan who was paranoid about both Commies and Latin Americans, present their line. It went over, judging by the quotes in the paper, like a lead balloon.

"Why, if we're gonna *pay*

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'em," she went on, "don't we pay the *good* guys instead o' the *bad* ones?"

"American foreign policy since the nineteenth century has been based on the idea that oppressive regimes are the only ones that are safe for us to deal with. If they were free, they might disagree with us."

"That's un*american!*"

I gazed sadly toward Washington, invisible over the southern horizon. "Colubria isn't the only unamerican government in the Western Hemisphere. Of course, we only back *right* wing dictators, since our little experiment with Castro in the fifties . . actually, in Latin America, it's not always easy to tell the good guys from the bad ones."

"Washin'ton, neither." She huffed a little huff and took the paper back.

Our visitor Friday morning was a surprise in many ways. We had hustled to get the decorator scraps out of the way in case the client turned out to be worth impressing.

Meester Smeeth was about four hundred pounds of less than beautiful scenery. Fortunately we had an armless chair strong enough to hold him. When he took off his dark glasses, the shifty eyes behind them went well with his heavy shadowed jowls. His speech was a nice balance of Third World, outdated textbook, and slangy Americanisms; I would have paid well for it if I'd been a Hollywood casting director.

I introduced him to my partner. The look he gave her was ambivalent: he wanted to girl-watch her, but he didn't like to do business with women. After devouring her with his eyes for a minute—I think he gained a couple of pounds that way—he made the reluctant decision.

"Ah, Meester Brown. Not to be rude to a charming lady." He pasted a disgusting, condescending, lecherous smile onto his obese face. "Thees ees a very, you could say, confidential, business, and I would prefer to talk, ah, one to one."

"Certainly, Mr. Smith. Do you mind, Miss Witt . . . ?" I took part of the sting out by exiling her with a conspiratorial wink on his blind side.

"Thank you, Mr. Brown. I do have some fairly urgent work to attend to, if you'll excuse me." She walked out, holding her hips as rigid as I'd ever seen them, but they still had a nice motion that Meester Smeeth didn't miss. My rates doubled for his lecherous look at my girl.

When she closed the door be-

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hind her, he turned back to me. "Is this room bugged?" he asked *sotto voce*.

"No way. We just supervised the redecoration. Everything taken apart and put back together. We have a great number of confidential discussions in this room, and we're very careful about that sort of thing." That was pretty much true, though we weren't that obsessive about it. We did say things we didn't want any federal, state or local authorities listening in on. I was reminded, though, to touch the intercom switch so Joy Sue could listen in.

"Very well, then. My card, sir."

It was an ornate item that read:

COL. ENRIQUE POZAL DE MANTECA
PRESIDENTIAL AIDE
REPUBLIC OF COLUBRIA

My rates went up again, to a point where I didn't think he would buy.

"First I should tell you, Colonel, uh, Manteca, that my consultation fees are a bit steep. I charge three hundred dollars per hour, payable when service is rendered."

He pulled out a wallet from somewhere amid folds of fat and extracted six crisp new U.S. hundreds, consecutive serial numbers, and laid them on my desk. I put the paperweight on them and checked in with my watch.

"You perhaps stay in touch with the news," he said. "You may be aware that our application for a loan from your government was . . . not fulfilled. At a very critical time in our national development."

I don't go around crusading, but I got as far as opening my mouth to tell him to get lost when he held up his hand, palm facing me.

"I know what you are about to say, Meester Brown. That you are not in sympathy with our governmental policy. Certainly, sir, no right thinking person could be in sympathy with what has been reported by the biased media."

Nor any left thinking person either, I added mentally.

"Our problem," he went on, "is that we are handicapped in our program of critically needed internal reforms by repeated attacks from within and without . . . border incursions, actually attempted invasions of Colubria, by reactionary, Fascist neighboring states." That wasn't quite the way I'd heard it.

"And internally, a Communist fifth column of the most vicious Stalinist/Maoist type. We have had to divert funds from

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much-needed industrialization and agrarian reform in self-defense.

"Both the Fascists and the Communists would like to see our struggle for democracy fail. We want to universalize the franchise . . . redistribute the large land holdings so that every rural family may be self-sufficient . . . establish an urban industrial base—ecologically sound!—to support the poor of our cities and make them proud, free, and prosperous citizens."

He seemed near tears at the plight of his fellow countrymen. If I couldn't have seen his shifty eyes right then, I might have bought a set of off-brand encyclopedias from him.

"So what do you need from me, colonel? What's the job to be done, and why have you chosen me for it?"

He smiled. A low-mileage, only- drove- it- to- church- on-Sundays smile.

"Why we have chosen you, Meester Brown, is because of your reputation for . . . uncanny insight into the market." I was noticing that the more he got into the subject the better his English became. Interesting. I figured the poor ignorant foreigner front concealed some pretty sharp perceptions.

"And what we have decided to do," he continued, "is to issue bonds to finance our democratization and economic recovery."

I was more dubious than stunned, but some of both. I stalled for time by scribbling some notes on a legal pad. After a little while I said:

"Colonel, I wouldn't be doing my job right if I encouraged you in this." This was true, and good counsel. When I'm bought, I stay bought till the term of the money expires. "For one thing, without looking it up I can assure you that your government's credit rating will be about XYZilch. For another, the American people don't like your ruling party, the government."

"We have friends in your country," he responded, trying not to be stiff and hostile but not quite succeeding.

"I'm sure you do. And they'll nearly all be hard-nosed right-wingers who know the value of an investment down to the penny. Excluding a few extremist kooks who don't have two dimes to rub together."

He didn't quite stand up in righteous indignation, but he did shift his blubber to a more vertical position. "Sir, are you attempting to insult the people of Colubria?"

"I'm attempting to earn my consulting fee. You hired me for advice, I'm giving you sound advice. Don't waste your money

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trying to sell bonds. You won't get enough back to pay the printing bill."

He deflated a bit. "Please excuse my outburst. We have been met with undeserved disdain and opprobrium, mostly brought about by your partisan press."

I was aware that they didn't have a partisan press in Colubria since the government had taken over *La Prensa* and *El Espejo*, jailed the editorial staffs, and replaced them with administration puppets. "It would take a very expensive PR campaign to reverse that image. No, colonel, it's a no-win proposition economically." I looked at my watch, took three of the hundreds out from under the paperweight, and pushed them back toward him. "You've paid for a written report to that effect, if you'll tell me where to mail it."

His unpleasant muddy swarthiness turned a sort of chalk-grey. I had a sudden hunch that he was feeling the guillotine or machete or whatever they used down there, on the back of his neck if he came home without the goods. I also hunched he'd been to several respectable firms before he had come to me.

"Alternatives?" he croaked. "Surely there are alternatives?"

For some reason I felt like getting him off the hook he belonged on. Don't ask me why, except that there's no bigger sucker than the con man himself.

"What I can do, colonel, is to consider and research some possible plans. Give me about a week. How can I get in touch with you?"

He gave me the name of a posh New York hotel, and peeled off ten more C-notes. "A modest retainer." He held out his hand and I shook it, glad that the width of the desk prevented a Latin *abrazo*. His hand, as I'd suspected, was soft, warm, moist, and oily. I hardly waited for him to get out the door before I wiped his handshake off on my trousers.

"All clear," I said to the intercom after he closed the door behind him.

"D'you s'pose he *means* that, they'd like to do all that democracy stuff?" Joy Sue asked as soon as she came into the room. "He sounded like he meant what he was talkin' about."

"You weren't watching his eyes."

"Oh." She was silent a moment. "That's better. I don't rilly *want* to like him. I ditton like the way he looked at my *butt*."

"I thought it was your chest he was looking at."

"Them, too."

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She sat in the straightbacked chair at the end of the desk rather than occupy the one that was still warm from him, and we were both silent for a minute.

"You ain't gonna do anything *immoral,* are you?" she asked after a while.

"You mean like exploit poor Colonel Manteca?"

"You know what I mean. Like help 'em, so they can keep on killin' widders and orphans."

I sighed. "I'm obliged to finish the job I agreed to do. A consultation report on his fundraising problem. That's a few thousand legal bucks for us."

She sighed back at me. "Sometimes Ah think your *il*legal money is a lot more *moral.*" She came around the desk and sat on my lap, one arm over my shoulder and her head on my cheek. If I hadn't known her so well, I'd have thought she was being tender and pensive. I patted the outboard side of her knee, which was all I could reach with both of us coiled up in the executive armchair.

"What I *am* trying to do," I told her, "is figure a way to make a killing off them without actually helping them."

"We c'n *thaink* about it."

She dusted my face with her hair till the various electronic gadgets around the office reminded us we had a busy day going.

When we were closing the office that evening, she went into the powder room, brought out the spray can of Lysol, and doused Colonel Manteca's sixteen hundred dollars with it before she put it in the safe.

We basically moved over the weekend to our new place. I mostly sat and thought while Joy Sue and the movers did the worrying about what went where. We almost forgot the sixty grand behind the TP dispenser in the old place.

Our first night in the new place she was tired enough to drop right off, but I lay awake for a long time, trying not to toss and turn, before I finally fell asleep.

Then in the middle of the night I popped wide awake from a strange dream in which I was driving a VW Beetle to Washington to participate in a filibuster in the senate. I sat up and tried to figure out the dream. When I did, I laughed. She mumbled, opened her eyes, tried to speak, and fell right back to sleep.

I was up first, and when I finally located the coffeemaker —I hit my toes three times on things I wouldn't have thought

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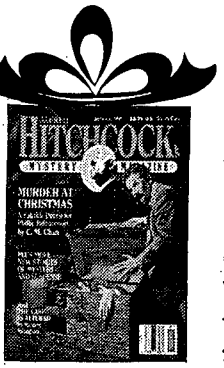

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would be there—I put in an extra scoop to wake up any brains that might need it.

By the time Joy Sue drifted in with eyelids at half-mast, I had code words and hypothetical figures covering two or three sheets of paper on the breakfast table. When she showed signs of motility and responsivity, I gave her a quiz on nineteenth and twentieth century history. Like ninety percent of Americans, she didn't know the answers, so I told her: the original meaning of "filibuster," and how the VW got started.

"I always thought a fillybuster was somebody that trained hosses," she giggled.

I briefly outlined my plan to her. "Soun's a li'l risky," she responded when I finished.

"What's life without risk?" I answered speciously. She poured another cup of coffee and withheld comment.

My consultation report took some hours to prepare. The billing statement to cover it was done more quickly, since we saved time by rounding all the figures upward.

I called Manteca's HQ in New York and left a message with an aide, giving him an appointment in Wilmington the following Tuesday.

Meanwhile I made a lot of phone calls: my lawyer and a former State Department person he referred me to. A Sierra Club member I knew. The president of the World Orphans and Widows Fund (WOWF). A board member of Amnesty International. The State Corporation Commission. A multimillionaire with known Fascist leanings (he was hard as hell to get through to—I think that crowd must be a little paranoid). A free-market anarchist. A Greenpeace activist. The publishers of a couple of insiders' newsletters. Some Latin American exiles in New York and Miami. A lot of other folks.

I didn't use the same words on all of them, nor did I tell them all the same facts. I did swear them all to mortal secrecy, one of the best ways I know of networking information along the right lines.

Colonel Pozal de Manteca poured himself into the chair, sloshing a good bit over the edges. Joy Sue sat safely on my side of the desk, though there was no doubt she could have outrun him if it got serious and he was too corpulent to do anything but squash her flat if he caught her.

"Miss Witt, my partner, is in my complete confidence," I began. "She was very helpful in preparing this report, and if

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your principal—" I didn't even like saying his name out loud "—decides to follow through with the plan I have outlined, she will be a vital member of the team."

I wasn't subjecting her to trial by ordeal. She had asked to sit in, partly to monitor me and partly, I thought, for the same reason people like to watch snakes through a plate glass window.

He nodded. He didn't like the idea of women getting involved in anything important, but Joy Sue's business uniform of the day was distractingly low-cut, and his sensualism outvoted his philosophical position on the subject.

I held the report in my hands. Best rag bond, in a five dollar cover. After some hesitation we'd had the final draft done by a professional typist who had been known to keep secrets from the CIA, SEC, FBI, and IRS. Physically, a perfect specimen.

"Before I hand you the report," I went on, "let me give you a brief oral introduction. You've heard, of course, of Adolf Hitler."

A dreamy smile contaminated his already impure face. "Ah, *der Fuehrer!* One of the heroes in the pantheon of El General. A true idealist, much misunderstood. A very practical and decisive man at first, but later led astray by wrong advisors and finally betrayed by treacherous underlings."

My scale of fees went up another couple of notches. I'd expected this—it was actually part of my sales pitch—but seeing it right before my eyes was something else.

"What many people aren't aware of," I continued, "is the creative financing he used to, ah, underwrite the . . . consolidation of Germany and the expansion of the Third Reich." Joy Sue didn't know enough about the subject to be disgusted with me for the mealy-mouthed way I was euphemizing this bigger than usual blot on human history.

"One of the ventures he used to acquire capital for his, ah, program was to hire Dr. Ferdinand Porsche to design an efficient, economical car that the workers could afford. At that time, the average German worker rode a tram or walked or used a bicycle. So he gave them the opportunity to buy shares in an industry that would give them wheelpower of their own." Which they did get, finally, ten or fifteen years after they bought the stocks —whose purchase price had gone for war machines—when his bones were mouldering in a bunker under Berlin. But I

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didn't add that part.

"Ah, yes—ingenious," agreed Manteca. "But our position is not exactly the same—our workers, they have not the capital in the first place, which is why we must look outside our country for the means of development."

Joy Sue twiddled with the ruffle on the yoke of her blouse, distracting him just enough.

I assured Manteca that I was aware he had to recruit foreign capital, then went on to explain the critical element: "You might do something in, for example, Switzerland or Germany, some of the Arab states or South Africa—but that's out of my province, and I assume you're here because you want U.S. money.

"Now, as I said, the general American public is opposed to the . . . Padrastro regime. The ones who would support it would insist on keeping close control over how their funds are used, and make damn sure they get a decent return. If you want to recruit U.S. capital, the only way you'll succeed is by establishing a government-sanctioned but independent corporation for economic development, and giving the shareholders a vote in it."

I was over my head in megaeconomics, sociology, and politics, and I knew it. My discreet shudder and gulp at the thought were overshadowed by Joy Sue's answering the phone, putting the customer on hold, and excusing herself. "The basic plan is outlined in this report. If you care to invest that much, after studying the outline, we can do you a comprehensive plan in a few weeks, for—" I watched his greedy eyes watching Joy Sue's retreating posterior, and revised my estimate upwards "—say around thirty thousand." I handed him the report, with a bill for two grand on top instead of discreetly tucked inside the bundle as I usually did.

He took it, flipped through it, scrutinized a couple of passages, and looked thoughtful. "*Muy bien.* I will present this to my principal and report his response to you. Thank you, Meester Brown."

I accepted the twenty bills he peeled off in lieu of a handshake. I'd given an honest report, charged enough for it, and figured, for a number of reasons, that we were rid of him.

The next few days we got the office shipshape, knowing it would never be Bristol-fashion. We got the apartment to the point that it was safe for a man to make a pot of coffee in the morning, though since she had

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got there first, all of my stuff was on the wrong side of the medicine cabinet. We kept tossing each other little ideas for quick scams just to stay in practice, without stirring up any real sentiment. I tried to get off the ground with an idea that involved commuting between L.A. and Dallas while trying to keep our legal business going in Wilmington, but it wouldn't jell.

The appearance of El Coronel at the office the following Thursday—the more I saw of him the more he reminded me of Hermann Goering and the less I liked him—was a surprise.

Joy Sue had had enough of him and found a project to occupy her in the back room. I managed to avoid his handshake by moving a chair for him.

"We have decided to proceed with the consultation," he announced as soon as we got past the opening rituals. I'd put him so far out of my mind it just didn't register for a minute, so I reached for a legal pad and dug in the drawer for any one of thirty working pens that were right in front of my eyes. Oh, yes. The Colubrian Bonds, which I'd already told him would have to be voting shares.

"You understand," I began, "a comprehensive plan can only state facts and explore probabilities. The project has to be done one step at a time, depending on how the previous step develops. And of course the research time . . ." I didn't really want the job, easy thirty grand or no easy thirty grand, I realized as I listened to myself try to talk him out of it.

He brushed away my disclaimers like so many Colubrian peasants. "Yes, yes, we know all that, Meester Brown. We are realists."

I bet you are.

"When will you be ready to come to Colubria?"

Third time in a row he'd caught me off balance. You livin' too soft, Billy John. I didn't think it got as far as my face that time before I put on a thoughtful knitted brow.

"There's a couple of weeks' research I'll need to do here first," I said judiciously. "Plus taking care of my regular business . . ."

"*Muy bien*, I will send you teeket." He extracted from one of his many pockets—he was in uniform today—two tight bundles of U.S. hundreds, Treasury bands still around their charming little tummies like corsets on a Victorian maiden. All factors considered, some of our own cloak-and-dagger folks in Washington had to be feeding them the stuff, and I felt the

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same kind of outrage Joy Sue had expressed.

My disclosure was about three-quarters written by the time the tickets arrived a few days later, for a domestic flight to Miami and AeroColubria from there to Ciudad Padrastro, formerly Ciudad Antigua.

I'd done all I could from resources available, which included everything from a 1957 edition atlas and travel brochures to statistical reports and recent periodicals. The trip was definitely necessary, and I was irked at myself that Manteca had pointed this out to me before I noticed it.

He'd sent two sets of tickets, and this tipped the balance inside my head. I had no fear for myself, as useful as they meant me to be. But I still had hesitated to take Joy Sue, though I wasn't quite sure for which reason, if any. I earnestly talked it over with her, and she was a little scared of the idea, too, so of course there was no holding her back after that.

I called my travel agent, made some changes and additions. We made arrangements with Irv Cohen to be our *locum tenens,* or at least our *telephonum tenens* through a call-forwarding arrangement, for the week and a bit we'd be gone.

The flight down was better than average. We occupied fifty percent of Colubria's international air fleet, a mellow old 707 that rattled a bit but had room for my knees. Joy Sue required extra smooching, because of the age of the plane and the nature of our destination, to handle her fear of takeoff.

I'd hit the Third World now and then in my career—partly looking for boltholes in case one of my schemes backfired someday—so I wasn't particularly surprised, but landing in Ciudad Padrastro threw Joy Sue a little off balance.

She'd expected, I think, something like the popular image of Germany in the late thirties and early forties, militant paranoia and starchy uniforms all around. There were a few uniforms—not very starchy in that climate—but the paranoia was taking its siesta along with the rest of the inhabitants. There was a soldier lounging in camouflage fatigues, a submachine gun hanging from his shoulder by its strap, and another napping against a wall.

The sun was about double Florida strength, and nobody was moving faster than they needed to.

We shuffled through *aduana* and *inmigración* with the other

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passengers. One of the pockets of my guayabera shirt had multiple Xeroxes of a letter of introduction Manteca had provided us with, and a handful of U.S. bills to back them up. Even if we hadn't rushed at the last minute to get Joy Sue a passport, I think we would have got through okay.

I'd changed our arrival to a couple of days earlier, so I could get a true view of the place before the guided tour began. We took our choice from the two Chevettes offered by a minor American car agency, registered at a modest hotel that housed a mixture of middle class Latins and cheerful young Americans and Europeans on gypsy tours, freshened up a bit, and took the rest of the day for a drive in the country.

As in much of Caribbean America, Colubria has an abrupt coastline—a brief coastal plain with hills almost hovering over it. In a couple of hours we'd gone through gently rolling country with scattered cattle spreads and little patches of slash-and-burn farming, past rainforests on the sea side and semi-desert in the rain shadow, great haciendas and little thatch huts with dozens of Indian children oozing out of them.

"Looks to me," said Joy Sue after a long silence, "like there's plenty o' good farm land roun' here. Ah don't see why they cain't feed all the people." She lapsed back into silence, then after a minute added, "Or is that jus' the biased American press?"

I wasn't sure myself. "That's one thing we're here to find out," I answered her.

By the time we could see the next rank of hills covered in pines, the road had dwindled to an improvisation of red clay reinforced with slippery riverjack rocks, and we decided to turn back. It was a tricky maneuver to roll back to the last turning-around place, and when we didn't slip off the edge of the mountain, we thanked the little plastic St. Christopher someone had stuck to the edge of the dashboard.

On the way back to Ciudad Padrastro we stopped in a village for a *refresco*. We sipped not quite lukewarm Coca-Cola, I introduced her to the delightful red apple banana—she wanted to buy the whole stalk of them to take back with us—and I had a little chat with the shopkeeper under the thatch arbor that was his *tienda*. Yes, it was beautiful country. Yes, many things grow here. When I edged into the area of sociology and politics, his silences were eloquent.

By luck the village priest

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emerged from the little stucco church while we were there, and by better luck he happened to be an American. If he hadn't approached us, I would have approached him; as it was, we had a very interesting talk over a beer I treated him to. Joy Sue did her ladylike best not to distract him from his vow of celibacy, but I figured she gave him an interesting thought or two to go over at his next confession.

On parting we shared a friendly handshake and a much needed contribution to the parish building fund.

Halfway back to the city, she finally spoke. She'd been digesting my conversation with the priest all that while. What triggered her off was one of those abrupt arbitrary roadblocks with a truck full of armed soldiers that you see in places like Colubria.

After we'd gone through the red tape, shown our passports and the letter of introduction, she said, "It jus' don't make sense. They got jus' 'bout ever'thing they need here, if they did it *right*. They don't need a lot o' soldiers, jus' more farmers."

I didn't try to give her a long lecture on the totalitarian mind. I did tell her I thought we couldn't make it any worse and might make it better. I wasn't sure this had reassured her.

As we reached the brink of the high country overlooking Ciudad Padrastro, the low sun behind us gilded the city and capped a million waves of the Caribbean with gold. I pulled off the road just to look and share it with Joy Sue.

We watched in silence for a couple of minutes, holding hands. Afraid I would get sentimental, I shifted into the business mode.

"See the harbor down there?" I asked her. "That's only a twenty foot channel, if it hasn't silted up. They can dredge it, use the spoil to build a mole, and expand the dock area, get some commerce coming in and out. Bring in export dollars, some imports to boost the standard of living. Yacht club and marina in that little cove there past the end of town. Luxury resort, golf course. Maybe a casino out on that little point there. Get the place on the cruise ship circuit, fly rich Americans down every week, let 'em leave some foreign exchange at the roulette tables . . ."

By the time I finished, I'd planned enough construction projects, offshore small industries, and tourist traps to keep Colubria prosperous for at least half a century. Joy Sue took it

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all in, but her mouth looked as if she was taking a grain of salt along with it.

We had dinner at our hotel, unfashionably early by local standards—we didn't feel like waiting till bedtime, in the Hispanic tradition—but there were enough locals to get a kind of a picture. The atmosphere in the dining room was mildly festive.

"Maybe it ain't as bad as I thought," Joy Sue pronounced over a seductive caramel flan and fierce local coffee.

"Things usually aren't." I wasn't sure what I meant by that, if anything. She saw the festivity, which looked pretty gay by American standards. By Latin standards, though, it was just too cautious. Not boisterous enough, too many covert glances, for Hispanics eating and drinking in a group. All of a sudden I had the *feel* of the country, and it fitted with all the random data I'd acquired: Big Brother wasn't persecuting everybody all at once, but they didn't know where he'd strike next: Indians? Small tradesmen? Middle class? I didn't tell Joy Sue all I was seeing.

After dinner we joined in the fine old local custom of strolling around the plaza, and I got the same feeling from the crowd there. Joy Sue was fascinated by everything: the behavior of the people, the grand old mouldering buildings side by side with crumbling slums, costumes, poverty and prosperity intermingled, color everywhere.

We walked back to the hotel by a side street off the plaza, and squatting hunched against a wall, bare feet on the filthy sidewalk, was an urchin selling tickets to the Loteria Nacional. I had learned in my earlier travels basically to ignore beggars and street vendors, but it was all new to Joy Sue.

Momentum carried us a couple of steps past before she brought me to a stop.

"That pore *chile!*" she gasped. "She's filthy, an' that little dress o' hers is all raggedy, an' she ain't even got no *underwear* on!" I hadn't noticed the gender of the child, but under Joy Sue's guidance I saw it was a little girl of about five, dull-eyed and malnourished looking, and clad as she'd said, in dirt and rags. "Whut we gonna *do* 'bout her?"

"Same as for the other three million or so, I guess. Pray a lot and . . ." I tapered off. What I was saying seemed awfully callous and flip compared with what Joy Sue was seeing. Dooleymont never saw a culturally and economically disadvantaged case like this one.

To give the short version, Joy

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Sue ended up with the child's whole inventory, several sheets of lottery tickets worth about five dollars U.S. if they weren't counterfeit, and the kid ended up with all our local money, twenty-some U.S. in ones, and instructions to take it to her *mamá, prontisimo*. Joy Sue wanted to give her a U.S. hundred, but I convinced her that not only was it beyond their capacity to comprehend and handle, it could end them up in jail, getting tortured for a confession without even knowing why.

Half consciously I'd been looking forward to the stimulating effect travel has on Joy Sue, but that night, when she held me close, there was no lust in it—just a primitive need for comfort and reassurance. The last thing she said as she drifted into a fitful sleep was, "Billy, we got to do somethin' *'bout* this place."

Great, I said to myself. It's not enough to rescue a corporation we accidentally scuttled. Now we have to rescue a whole banana republic we're not even guilty of.

The next day I left her sleeping, tipped a maid to take her breakfast in bed at ten, and went to do some things I needed to do.

When I got back around time for a late lunch, she was miffed.

"Ah like *that*," she said with moderate asperity. "Jus' leavin' me all alone in a strange country here!" I thought I heard a little fright under the petulance.

"What about me?" I retorted. "I've been all alone out in the city while you were safe in the hotel . . . actually, you were safer and happier here than you would have been with me."

She pouted at me for a moment—her lower lip is exceedingly sexy—then answered grudgingly, "Ah *might* forgive you if you feed me a good lunch."

"How about fresh seafood on the waterfront?"

She'd never actually stood on the shore and watched the sea, excluding our trip across Chesapeake Bay. During which she had kept her jaw clamped and her eyes shut. Having grown up in the mountains, she was fascinated by the whole scene, so long as there was solid footing underneath. Not to mention what she did to the day's catch.

We packed the next morning, checked out, returned to the airport to wait for our official welcoming committee to arrive. They were fortunately late enough that we were able to mingle with the arriving crowd from the flight we were sup-

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posed to be on, and complicated lies were unnecessary.

With clever maneuvering I managed to shelter Joy Sue from Manteca, our official greeter, at the cost of sitting next to him myself in the vintage stretch Cadillac that carried us, by a scenic roundabout way, to a grossly resplendent hotel that seemed to be reserved for state occasions. We drove down broad palm-lined boulevards and past prosperous shops getting to it.

I managed a moment alone with Joy Sue to warn her to assume the suite was bugged. She didn't need a lot of cues—our conversations alone, except in the shower, had just enough doubt and negativity to make us sound realistic. It was more than a little exhilarating—and not too unrealistic—to play the subversive spy role. It was also very interesting the next day to find them answering questions we'd asked each other the night before.

Dinner at the Palacio Presidencial that night was a bit of an ordeal. Fortunately there was some conversation in English. El Presidente, Jesús María Padrastro y Cabrón, for all that I was as repelled by him in person as in the media, had a tremendous presence. I got the feeling that Joy Sue was safer from him than I was, which didn't make me like him any better.

The executive staff, thank God, had to excuse themselves for an important *conferencia*, leaving us with a ragtag cluster of social hangers-on: what looked like bedraggled remnants of an old aristocracy, some obvious nouveaux-riches, a smirking little acolyte that I thought must be the general's favorite of the moment.

As soon as it was decent—it must have been around one in the morning, and we were yawning without concealment—we pled jet lag and asked to be excused. A major-domo sort of person saw us to a state limousine, and we collapsed as soon as we were back at the hotel. Hugging again for security, nothing else.

Our guided tour the next day was very enlightening in the context of our earlier travels, though without them it would have been misleading indeed: a four-lane highway that went down a beautiful coast, then ended abruptly five kilometers out of town; a gray concrete heap—housing for the poor, never finished—that would have made a Federal project in inner Chicago look pleasant; a model farm village, government-sponsored, appar-

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ently populated by a crew of smiling Hollywood extras hired for the occasion; a broad, bulldozed "industrial park" containing one factory that seemed to be turning out plastic sombreros. Maybe I saw them upside down, and they were actually chamberpots.

Showpieces all, abandoned for years and abruptly revived for the show. Manteca said, "You see the beginnings we have made. But we are helpless to continue without further funding. Thus our urgent need for capitalization."

Joy Sue had suddenly switched and was buttering up Manteca, hanging on his every word. I wasn't worried about it, but I had to tease her as I scrubbed her back that night.

"Have you suddenly fallen for the colonel's charm?" I asked her.

"Ah just decided I ain't afraid of nobody that needs wheels on him, he's so fat." She bit me gently on the chest. " 'Sides, we got a job to do. Good PR." As she towelled me dry she added, "But he *does* remind me I'd like a *real* man for a change."

For an instant I was off balance, till I saw the look on her face.

"Would I do instead?"

"That's what I had in mind."

For a long while our air-conditioned suite was as warm and steamy as the tropical night outside. I hoped the listeners enjoyed the tapes.

There followed a day and a half of conferences. Most of the bigwigs weren't quite ready to accept Joy Sue as a serious businessperson, but she took copious notes in her inimitable shorthand, and they were able to tolerate her by thinking of her as my secretary.

It was unquestionable that they wanted about a million U.S. for more showpieces and many millions more for a war machine aimed more inward than outward. Joy Sue was good at asking innocent questions that managed to reveal the truth. The whole country looked like so great a place to take a siesta—and once in a while reach up and pluck a ripe mango off a tree—that I wondered why they bothered building up such a power structure, but there are some kinky characters in this world.

Joy Sue summed it all up after we were on the plane, bound for Miami: "Nice country, just get rid o' *them.*"

I agreed.

Putting the package together was about the hardest, most complex job I'd ever done. I

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worked on it night and day while Joy Sue took over most of the routine work of the brokerage, including a lot of stuff she wasn't particularly licensed to do but which we got by with.

To omit a lot of description and technical stuff, I had the whole plan for the Colubrian Development Corporation, with reasonable contingency provisions, ready to deliver when Manteca showed up for our next meeting a few weeks later.

This time he was with the Minister of Economics, a worried-looking little man in his fifties who was named Plata y Oro.

My package contained two sets of proposed charters and bylaws, one for Delaware and one for Colubria, a nightmare for my lawyer and totally beyond my depth; suggested certificate designs, a printer's dream full of allegorical images in four colors with hot gold stamping; a proposed agenda for the first stockholders' meeting; a skeleton outline of projected procedures . . . well, you get the idea. I figured it would take the whole palace staff weeks to pick through it and realize it was political quicksand. Fortunately there were plenty of copies, so I gave one each to Manteca and Plata y Oro.

They both thumbed through, realized it was complex stuff, and decided to take them home for a good thorough read.

"We will need to estudy these in depth," said Manteca. "Does your fee cover further consultation, in explication of what you have written here?"

"By all means." I handed him my billing for thirty grand. I'd been busting my buns on the job so long I was beginning to think it was actually worth it. "There's a great deal there that will profit from explanation." A true enough statement to make me a little queasy.

He scanned the bill and took out six more Treasury bundles. I wrote him a nice receipt. We smiled and shook hands all around—I didn't even mind it, with thirty grand on my desk—and they took their leave.

Once more I thought we were rid of them. I only hoped I hadn't got us on their hit list by doing what I promised to do.

But in a couple of weeks Manteca and Plata y Oro were back.

They called from the airport just before lunchtime. I didn't particularly want to watch Manteca eat, but we reasonably owed them a meal, so we met in a small private room at the Bears Club. There were funny looks from members,

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along with a murmur of curiosity.

"El General," began Manteca over brandy, "had, ah, misgivings regarding the . . . degree of control that would be in hands other than official—"

I daubed my lips with fine linen. "I'm not surprised. But that's the only way you can sell the product in the States. You can, of course, use my proposal as a pattern for offerings elsewhere; rewrite what doesn't suit you and see if it sells in some of the other places I've suggested."

He shook his head. "We have . . . tentatively explored some other possibilities. Our final decision is to hire your firm to proceed with the plan you have prepared."

Joy Sue's eyes dilated a little. I was half surprised and half not surprised at all.

Before I could respond, he started digging money out of his uniform. I found myself wondering if perhaps he wasn't fat at all, just padded with money from the CIA or wherever.

"Here is a modest retainer for to begin operations," he said, handing me two bundles of five thousand each. "We will establish a, how you say, drawing account for ongoing expenses. We would like to proceed as rapidly as possible, now that the plan is firm."

We migrated to the office, spent the afternoon and into the evening making arrangements.

"One detail concerns me," said Manteca. "The facial value of the shares at twenty-five cents U.S. You will have to sell many millions to recruit the needed capital."

"The face value isn't the market value," I assured him truthfully. "Many corporations do that—it limits our *liability* to twenty-five cents per share, though we will sell them for an average of around five dollars." I didn't bother to tell him that different buyers would pay different prices. Like twenty dollars minimum for our Texas oilman friend. He seemed satisfied.

As soon as we had shipped them off to their hotel in a cab, I got on the phone and started pre-selling. Among other things.

In terms of decisions made, work performed, and various acts of chicanery, it was a long grind, but in elapsed time only three months, when the first stockholders' meeting was held in Ciudad Padrastro.

There were about fifty *norteamericanos* there, with a lot of proxies. There were also far more native stockholders than anyone, including me, had ex-

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pected. I'd said "network," and they networked. At a buck U.S. a share, middle-class Colubrienses could afford the gamble.

Omitting a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff, by the end of the third day of the bilingual session our hand-picked board had been elected, the program approved as presented, and someone—not me—had organized a street fiesta, with extensive outside media coverage, congratulating Padrastro on what he'd never had the slightest intention of doing. There was no way he could back out without instant and serious international bad PR. Which we gambled he'd decide he couldn't afford.

Padrastro had been getting more purple in the face for three days, and Manteca greyer in the same degree. I almost felt sorry for the old lard-bucket.

A rather grand dinner was planned at the Presidential Palace for the final evening. I won't say I seriously feared detention and execution, but I saw the possibility of a bad scene, so I decided, over her protests, that Joy Sue had a headache or PMS or something. We got her shuttled out to the suburbs to a local family who were on our side. She made a face at me through the window as the car pulled away.

I had waited till forty-five minutes past the appointed time for my ride to the palace, and was wondering if I'd misunderstood the arrangements, when one of the palace's lesser limousines screeched to a halt before the hotel marquee where I'd been standing. Manteca opened a rear door and rolled out with surprising speed, greyer even than he had been.

He grasped my hand in desperation. *"Desgracia!"* he gasped. *"El Presidente has desaparecido!"* He dragged me into the car, and it resumed roadspeed, scattering the citizens like chickens.

I picked his brain and tried to calm him as we rode to the palace. "Did he disappear . . . *willingly?*"

Manteca frowned, and I could have sworn I saw a tear trickling down his cheek in the dark. "The *tesoro nacional* is *vacio*—not a dime left in it. Also, the numbers of the Swiss bank accounts from the safe in his bedroom . . . *Posiblemente,* I suppose, he might have been kidnapped and forced at gunpoint to open the vault and the safe."

"More likely he was captured by Martians in a flying saucer." His eyes lit up in momentary hope till he saw the cynical expression on my face. "I hope a

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little thing like this won't cause dinner to be cancelled. I'm starving."

"No, no. Dinner will be served. I will attend only briefly and ceremonially. There is work to be done, and I have no appetite." He was telling the truth.

We talked on the way out and while we were waiting for dinner to be announced. Half of AeroColubria had disappeared from the airport, destination unknown, and with it nearly the whole cabinet and higher-ranking palace staff. The only significant ones left behind —for punishment, I figured —were Manteca and Plata y Oro.

They were totally *non compos mentis,* running around in circles like panicked chickens. I would bill for a consultation fee later, but right now immediate action was required to forfend chaos, so I appointed myself temporary dictator of Colubria—the first real Yankee filibuster since the thirties at least, maybe in the whole century.

I got word to Joy Sue not to expect me for a couple of days. We restocked the National Assembly and the newspapers from the *juzgado,* appointed the winner of the last election as acting president—a unique twist in Latin American politics—and invented a lot of fairly transparent cover stories, like Padrastro's having to take up residency in a *sanitorio* because of recent overwork in economic rearmament.

We didn't want anyone to learn he'd left the country, though it was bound to leak out soon; we wanted to give the impression that he was our prisoner and there was still something in the treasury. Rumors of total bankruptcy would have resulted in what the French so romantically call a *chie-en-lit.*

Plata y Oro opened another set of vaults for us, and we found bales of local money suitable for keeping government services going till the economy firmed up. It was actually worth more than it had been—it had never had hard backing, but now at least it had a tinge of hope and optimism behind it.

The Colubrian Development Corporation had several million in hard funds in escrow that the Padrastro crowd couldn't get their hands on, and this was enough to get some quick cash flow projects, like the resort/casino complex, rolling before confidence faded.

Colubria still had a lot of problems, but the biggest one was gone. I was ready to shake hands and resign my position as consultant, but the new

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CEO's of the country and of the development corporation applied subtle pressures—a little bit of stick and a lot of carrot—that in a weak moment resulted in my signing a contract for an ongoing headache. There was a hell of a lot left to do. Running even a small banana republic's economic system is a bunch of work.

There wasn't a plane seat available for a few days anyhow, so we weren't delayed much.

We were up front in the first class section, warming up our pre-takeoff smooching—it had been a high-stress time, and Joy Sue needed a lot of extra reassurance—when the head stewardess hustled aboard a late-arriving passenger and seated him across the aisle from us.

There went our smooching. It turned out to be Colonel Manteca, in mufti. He was even greyer, his jowls were sagging, and his suit hung on him like a neglected dustcover.

He tried on a weary smile. "I have decided that the climate in Miami might be more beneficial," he said. "Certain of my fellow countrymen tend to connect me with, ah, unfortunate events that occurred during the reign of the, ah, retired *presidente*."

Before he deplaned at Miami, he got me aside and whispered, his breath moist in my ear: "If I might ask a great favor . . . I have no funds for survival. If you might advance me a modest loan, repayment would receive my earliest attention, once I am established in Miami."

Ungraciously, I dug out a couple of hundred we wouldn't need. Then, feeling unnecessarily guilty, I relented and wrote him a check on Barclay's for two grand. Actually it was a pretty cheap finder's fee, I told myself. "You may need some start-up capital, too," I said limply.

We made up for lost smooching on the Miami/Wilmington leg of the trip. And for a couple of days after we got back.

"Well, it was a hard job," I said to Joy Sue a few days later as we were getting ready to attack a mountain of paperwork prior to tax return time. "But at least we made—fees, commission, and all—close to half a million legal bucks."

She cleared her throat. "Ah got a li'l confession—actually, it's more *good* news. We ain't gonna hafta pay tax on all that."

I stood there, mouth open and heart sinking, and waited

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for her to drop the other shoe.

"See, I kinda done some reinvestin'. We own fifty thousand shares in the Colubrian Development Corporation . . . you made it soun' so good I jus' cootn pass it up."

I exhaled with strained patience. "Do you have any *idea* what a high-risk thing that was to do? It could've fallen apart at any stage."

Wide blue eyes stared at me in adoring innocence, melting my heart. Or at least my brain. "When I heard you pitchin' it over the phone t'all them people, you sounded like nothin' could go wrong with it. Wootn 'spec me to turn down a hot tip from a famous securities genius, would you?"

The Appalachian talk was all put-on this time, intended solely to manipulate me. Which it did.

Months later a dapper Latino in a gaudy checked jacket and fluorescent green tie bounced into the office, accompanied by an attractive Cuban-looking girl barely out of her teens, if that.

"Amigo!" the man said in a DJ sort of voice. "I have come to pay you back the two thousand two hundred and sixty-five dollars with which you were kind enough to save my life!" With a flourish he counted out that amount in old bills of mixed denominations. He was about two hundred pounds lighter, and only when I saw how he handled the money did I recognize him.

"Manteca! I'll be damned!"

He bowed and clicked his heels. "*Lo mismo.* And allow me to present my *amiguita,* Fidelia."

She poked him in the ribs with stiff fingers. "*Tu afianzada, cabrón.*"

"More precisely, my fiancée."

We chatted awhile. Even Joy Sue, when she saw she was buffered by Fidelia's presence, was nice to him.

As they were leaving, he whipped out a business card with Latin panache. "I am now respectable businessman in Miami—I have permanent visa as *refugido political.* Call upon me for your needs."

After they left, we looked at the card; it was Spanish on one side and English on the other. It had a West Tamiami Trail address, and the legend:

Enrique's A-1 Used Cars
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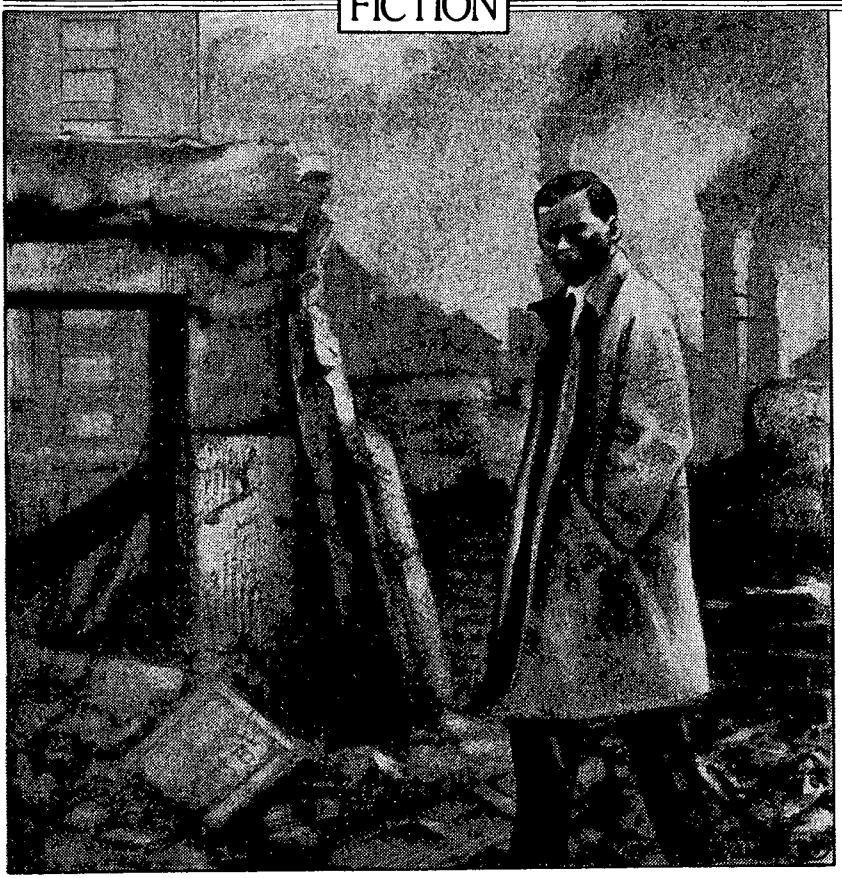

Ukiyo: The Floating World

by David White

Illustration by Timothy Standish

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Hatori-san downshifted into second gear. As the two-cycle motor revved up and shook, he turned the corner and entered an alleyway between a noodle shop and a vegetable stand, banging into a couple of garbage cans and running over some cardboard boxes. The motorcyclist in front of him turned another corner, glaring back momentarily as he leaned over, giving him the finger. Hatori-san stuck his head out the window and tried to look over his glasses. One windshield wiper didn't work, and the other one in front of him just barely moved above the dashboard. Smoke started coming up through the floorboards. Damn, he thought. He followed the bike around the corner but couldn't straighten out after hitting a puddle of water and oil and rammed into a short concrete retaining wall in front of someone's house, stopping suddenly, banging his head against the windshield. The wiper began moving from side to side, scratching the dirty water from before his face. He felt his forehead.

"Are you all right?" an older woman asked, standing near his door, bending down to examine him, frowning. "Do you want me to call the ambulance?" she asked him, almost sticking her head inside.

"No, no," he said, straightening up. "Thank you, I'm fine."

"Were you chasing him?" she asked, pointing down the street.

"Yes," he said.

"Are you the police?"

"I'm a detective," he said and looked about him. "Is the wall all right?" he asked and started to get out.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "It's not the first time. Look over there," she said and pointed, walking over to a large dent just ahead of him.

"Sorry," he said and tried to start the car. The motor finally kicked over, and he put it in reverse, grinding gears.

"I don't think you can catch him," she said. "He must be far away by now."

"Yes, I suppose so. I'll give up. I'm sorry," he said and backed the car up. The fender was crushed in a little. He put the car in first gear and slowly pulled away. "I'm sorry," he said again and gave a little bow of his head and a wave. "Sorry."

"No problem," she said, watching him go, starting through the gate.

As he got back into traffic, he fished out a pack of Golden Bat cigarettes from his raincoat pocket and poked around inside with

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a finger for one. Finally able to pull one out, he put it in his mouth and lit it.

His hands felt sticky against the steering wheel. The beginning of the rainy season, he thought. The spring had been pleasant, but now the rains would be coming, and he would have to carry his umbrella with him all the time. He turned on the radio to baseball. The Tokyo Giants were playing Hiroshima. He took a drag from his cigarette and looked around. They were still building on bombed-out lots. What had it been, ten years, he thought, since he had come back from the war, from Shanghai. He was lucky. He had all his legs and arms and sanity, more or less, and even disembarked from the ship wearing a tailored suit and hat. What a mess everything had been. He had not realized how bad things had become. He somehow thought things would remain the same. When he got back to Tokyo, to Shitamachi, the old lowlands, the reclaimed area, they were still farming in the area drained by Shinobazu Lake in Ueno Park. People were cutting down the trees and stealing wood off temple walls. He had never seen beggars here before. It reminded him of China. He had grown up in Asakusa near the Kannon Temple, near the Sumida River, and he had never been rich, but he'd never seen beggars. Not even during the famines in the countryside when farmers came to Tokyo by the trainload, carrying all their possessions rolled up on their backs, shining shoes or whatever to make a few yen.

He remembered as a young child fishing in the Sumida or Edo rivers and catching small mackerel or pike. It seemed so long ago he had to laugh. The rivers now were covered in kerosene oil. Even the carp couldn't survive, he thought.

He remembered how he and his mother had lived all those years and struggled and survived living above her little yaki-tori bar. She had worked hard, and he was able to get an education, even went to Tokyo University and studied law, had gotten a job with a government agency. He was sent to Formosa and then to Shanghai after the war started—changing everything forever.

He stopped at a light and lit another cigarette. The motorcyclist was nothing. He had recognized him from the night before. A group of kids had been riding their motorbikes around and around his apartment complex, and he had gotten sick of it. After an hour or so, about two in the morning, he took the elevator down and confronted them.

"Stop it," he had yelled. "I'm going to call the police."

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"Go ahead," one had said, the one he would later chase.

They argued for a while, and then they finally left, but not without first throwing some empty beer cans at him. He couldn't sleep the rest of the night.

He drove through the intersection, trying not to hit the pedestrians still walking across. But all this wasn't what he was really concerned about anyway. He was thinking of a case, a break-in and assault. A man had forced his way into an apartment two nights ago and tried to molest a woman. A child was in the other room and hadn't been able to go to school since, just sat in the corner and cried.

He knew the woman. He often visited her bar after work. It was a little place in Kita-Senju, on the eastern edge of Shitamachi. Just beyond that, you could still stand on rice paddies. It was a terminal for points north and west and had been for centuries, being on the old Tokaido line.

She'd mentioned it to him the night before, still upset by it all. He'd walked in about seven o'clock; nobody else was there. They were alone for the rest of the evening, talking until closing time at eleven. He drank too much cold sake, and she explained the whole mess. The night before, a regular customer whom they both knew had stayed late and had secretly followed her home. It was a small apartment. Her daughter was asleep in one room and she was in her pajamas watching TV in the other when she heard someone walking up the metal stairway and then rapping on her door. He called her name, and she recognized him from the bar.

She'd asked him what the matter was from behind the locked door, but he just kept pounding on the door and shaking the doorknob. Finally he begged her to let him in. By this time he was crying, she said. She told him that it was too late, that they were all asleep. She'd see him tomorrow. But he kept going on about how he loved her and couldn't live without her. She had laughed while telling it, seeming to be embarrassed by the whole thing. "I'm almost thirty-five," she said to Hatori. Actually she was closer to forty. "Can you imagine such a thing. And with Chieko sleeping in the back." By this time, supposedly, the girl was scared to death and was pleading for him to leave them alone. "Well," she told him, "you can imagine that by this time I'm fuming. I work hard, you know."

"Yes, I know," he said.

"And I can't put up with such nonsense. He'd been drinking. He

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left my place barely able to walk, and hadn't paid his bill. He owes me money. He has to be more responsible. I hate people like that. I won't take it any more. I've even talked to his boss to make him pay me what he owes me."

"How much does he owe you?" he asked.

"Well," she said, and hesitated. "I just mean that I have a business to run and a child. I don't have a husband. It's only us, you know."

"I know," he said. "It's tough."

"You're lucky you were never married," she said and laughed, looking away from him. "Really."

"Yes, I guess so. If you're left to take care of everything yourself." He had been married, sort of, long ago, in China. Only for a few years. Someone he'd met in a bar. She spoke a little Japanese, having lived in Osaka a few years studying, then working for a trading company in Shanghai. They'd never really married. It wouldn't have made much sense with the war going on, a Chinese national marrying a Japanese, even if he was only a civilian and hated the occupying forces as much as they did. They both had loved walking together in the many parks then around the city or staying in his apartment eating her cooking or reading aloud to each other Chinese or Japanese poetry.

Finally, she closed the shop early and sat down next to him at the counter, bringing out a couple of bottles of beer.

Later, he couldn't sleep and encountered the motorcyclist.

Now he was on his way to see the accused's boss. He was a carpenter and had a small company with a few employees, including the suspect, Namiki-san. It was near the bar, a few blocks from the station, in the older, seedier part of town that hadn't been destroyed in the war and still contained many older wooden buildings, many now with concrete fronts. There were still public baths with their long smokestacks belching black smoke and lots of little two story family shops with the living quarters upstairs. There were only one-way streets, with lots of kids running around everywhere.

Tokyo was still a haphazard collection of villages. The atmosphere, once you got away from the developed areas, was pastoral. In the evenings, people walked back and forth to the public baths in their robes and sandals, stopping to talk or to gather at a bar to drink. They danced the O-bon, the festival of the dead, in the

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streets in July and carried the O-mikoshi, the portable shrine, through the streets for good luck in spring.

He stopped the car to ask someone about the address, and then continued straight ahead until he saw the sign. It was an old warehouse near the tracks. There was some wood stacked in front, and someone stood at the entrance smoking a cigarette and watching his approach. An older man about fifty-five, his grayish hair cut short, his face brown and weathered. There was something of the country about him—he had probably come to Tokyo after the war and stayed. You could always tell someone who was from here from someone who wasn't. He wasn't. He still had dirt under his fingernails.

Hatori drove up to him and parked.

The man smiled and slowly came to him.

"How do you do?" Hatori said, getting out of the car.

"Fine," the man said rather reservedly, giving a small bow of his head.

Hatori gave him a name card.

"About Namiki-san, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hatori said and smiled, a little embarrassed.

"I don't understand him," he said. "Particularly recently. He's always late in the morning. I go to his place, and he's hung over. He doesn't even know what day it is."

Hatori moved toward the door. "I'm sorry," he said and moved a little closer yet.

"Yes?"

"I think it would be better if we talked inside."

"Oh, yes, yes, I'm sorry," he said. "How rude of me. I wasn't thinking. Yes, please. Please come in."

He led Hatori into his small office, then one step up into the tatami-mat room. They sat opposite each other on the floor at the low table. He called for his wife to bring some cold tea.

"It's starting to get muggy, isn't it?" the man said.

"Yes," Hatori said, laughing. "It sure is. The rainy season is finally here, I'm afraid. I can't do a thing in this weather."

"That's sure the truth, isn't it. Myself, I'm from up north. Can't get used to it."

His wife brought the tea and placed one cup in front of Hatori, the other one in front of her husband. They exchanged greetings. She still wore the casual kimono and bonnet of a farmer's wife. Real potatoes, the both of them, he thought.

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"But anyway," Hatori said, withdrawing a cigarette, "about this Namiki-san matter."

"Yes, yes," the man said, straightening himself up and staring at Hatori but at the same time taking a cigarette from the pack he extended. "Thank you, thank you very much."

"I guess you understand what has been happening. She called you, right?"

"Yes, yes," he said, "it's deplorable."

"And you've discussed it with him?"

"Yes, yes, a hundred, a thousand times. I don't know what's gotten into him. He's been working for me for about five years. He's also from up north, same area. I know his parents, and they asked me to please hire him. Things were so rough then, and he couldn't find a job."

"Was he a good worker before, before all this?"

"Yeah, yeah, he was. He drank too much, but he came to work on time and did his job. We got along fine. He's not a bad person, but when he drinks he changes. He . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't want to get him in any trouble, but his family asked me to take him because he got in some trouble back home and wanted to leave, to come to Tokyo and start over. Business was starting to pick up a little, so I could use him."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I assumed girl trouble. He needed money and had to leave town."

"I guess this was all right after the war."

"Well, actually, he first went to work for me before the war, but only a few months. He was drafted," he said. "It all seems so long ago. Everything was so crazy then. It's best not to ask too many questions."

"Yes, you're right." They both sat silently for a while smoking, their hands on the table, looking out the window at a man pulling a cart of flattened cardboard boxes and bottles. It suddenly began to rain hard, hitting against the window and metal roof.

"Well," Hatori said.

"Yes."

"I'm afraid the woman is really upset this time."

"Oh, did she call the police?"

"No, only me. Do you know her?" he said and mentioned the name of her shop.

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"No, not really. I know of her. Namiki-san has mentioned her on and off," he said. "But you can't really be sure of women like that, can you?"

Hatori didn't speak.

"I mean, I'm sure she's a nice enough woman, but, well, it's not exactly a proper kind of business for a woman with a child, is it?"

"No, I suppose not," Hatori said, beginning not to like the man. "She's had a rough life."

"Yes, of course, that's what I mean. It must be tough for her, just her and the child without a man. A daughter, isn't it?"

"Yes, a daughter," he said and started to get up.

The rain now was pouring down in sheets. Hatori was walking toward the entrance when water started coming in under the door on the concrete. The man stood up also and followed him to the door.

As Hatori drove he thought about what the man had said. It was true that the *mizu-shobai* world, the so-called water trade, wasn't much of a place for a respectable woman to work. Many of them had patrons who supported them, buying clothes and apartments, keeping them on the side, away from their families and offices. But it was a Japanese tradition just as much as taking time out to watch the cherry blossoms or the moon on a clear night. At night Tokyo was transformed into a shadowy, dreamlike world. A floating world of thousands of bars and brothels and restaurants and coffee shops all blending into each other. The Yoshiwara red-light district near the Asakusa Kannon Temple had been there for hundreds of years. Originally it was moved there, to the marshlands, to remove it from the rest of the city. If you had enough money, you could get lost within its walls until dawn. There were many stories of young shop clerks who spent all their money there, who finally were never heard from again. They just disappeared. It was a kind of drug, an opium haze. Of course, during the war it was destroyed along with the temple, but it still survived in its modern reincarnation as bars and Turkish baths. The girls wore miniskirts instead of kimonos, he thought as he drove through the rain and the shiny wet streets.

He decided to drive to the local ward office and find out about Mama-san. To look at the records. According to her, she had had a husband who died in the war in Manchuria. They were both from up north and from poor families. She had worked as a hostess in a

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cabaret and at some other jobs. She stayed there until about five years ago when she moved to Tokyo and bought the bar.

He pulled into the big parking lot across from the office building and parked the car. The rain had stopped as quickly as it had begun, and now the sun had come out, heating the streets and buildings, steam rising everywhere.

He showed a clerk his I.D. and got what he wanted. Everything seemed as she had said except her age, but he knew that. In fact, she was even a little older, forty-two. Surprisingly, he also found information on her husband. He had been in the war in China but was listed as missing in action. They had never found his body nor had any information about where it could have been. If he was in Manchuria, as the record stated, he must have been captured by the Russians and sent to their prison camps in Siberia. But supposedly the prisoners had all been sent back to Japan about five years ago. Hatori remembered the tens of thousands of what looked like well fed Japanese dressed in Russian uniforms, all holding copies of Japanese translations of Marx. They were all good little Communists for a few months until they seemed to get tired of it and started telling everyone how cold and miserable it had been. They moved back in with their families and were back to normal. But there was no record of her husband there, only a picture of him in his army dress uniform posing solemnly for his funeral photograph.

Hatori closed the book of records and gave it back to the clerk, thanking him, but suddenly he changed his mind and asked for it back. He returned to the table and started looking for the kanji, Chinese characters, for Namiki.

The steam was still rising from the streets as he drove away, but now the sun was going down over the buildings, turning them orange, and it was beginning to cool down and get dark. It was a little early, he thought, but he decided to go to a bar just around the corner from Mama-san's, a place as small and shabby as hers, maybe even shabbier. He had seen it before and always thought of going in but never did. It seemed a little rough, mostly blue-collar workers who came to drink and waste their money some more after playing pachinko pinball across the street. Smoking one cigarette after another, they would drink and talk horseracing. Their faces and hands were weathered and rough.

He found a place to park his car and waited there, listening to a talk show until she finally hung out her lantern and turned it

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on. It had grown dark while he waited. *"Irrashai,"* she said as he entered. Welcome.

"Hello," he said and sat down at the counter. Someone else was already there ahead of him. He hadn't seen him enter. They greeted each other. The other man sat a few stools down in his dirty beige uniform, a construction worker.

Hatori ordered a beer.

In a few moments she gave him a little something to eat and then filled his glass.

"You look familiar," she said. "Are you from around here?"

"I often drink around the corner," he said and told her the name of the place.

"Oh, I see," she said. "I thought so."

She poured him some more. "And how is she?" she asked.

"Oh, fine."

"I heard she had some trouble the other night."

"Yes, she did," he said and drank down the small glass.

She poured him some more.

"Do you know anything about it?" he asked.

"Well," she said, "I don't know, but I heard that Namiki-san caused some trouble."

"Yeah, that's right," he said. She was beautiful. He'd never realized how beautiful she was just from looking in through the window. She was dressed in a spring kimono and had her hair up in the old style. She must be single and have a patron, he thought, someone to buy her nice clothes and an expensive apartment. Now that he thought about it, he remembered seeing a large American car parked outside her place. He probably had given her the place for something to do, to keep her busy.

She poured him the last of his beer. He ordered something to eat and a bottle of cold sake.

"The Giants really stink this year, don't they?" the man said.

"Yes," Hatori said and laughed. "They really do. They're something. And after winning the championship last year. I don't get it."

"Me neither," the man said and went back to his beer.

Another man came in through the back door, obviously a coworker of his, and sat down next to him.

"Does he, Namiki-san, often come in here?" Hatori asked.

"Uuuhn, well, sometimes, I guess you'd say. Sometimes, right?" she said, pointing the question at one of the men.

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"Yes, sometimes, I guess."

"What is he like?" Hatori asked her, then.

"Well, now," she said, resting her chin in her hand in a thoughtful pose. "Like I said, I don't really know him. He seems nice enough. A large man, rather quiet. A carpenter, isn't he? From up north, near Aomori."

"Yes."

"But he could be trouble," the new man answered. "If he drinks too much, he starts complaining about everything and could be trouble, but usually he is no problem."

"Everybody likes him," she said and looked around. The others nodded in agreement. "Mama-san also comes from the same town," she said and went back to cutting up some vegetables behind the counter.

"I knew they came from the same area. I didn't know from the same town."

"They did," she said.

"I wonder if they knew each other then," he said.

"Oh yes, they did," the man nearest him said. "They were friends. All of them, her husband, too. It was a small town."

Hatori ordered another bottle. He was a heavy drinker himself. He'd leave the car here tonight and take the train home. Coming from Mama-san's, he had sometimes slept in the park in the summer. He had once gotten so drunk in the winter he spent the night sleeping on a shrine's steps, waking up with the snow falling and the proprietor hitting him with a broom. He felt hungry, too, so he ordered some sashimi, some raw tuna. He picked up some of the bright pink pieces with his chopsticks and put them in his mouth.

"So their families knew each other," he said.

She was leaning on the counter, talking to the others. She looked at the man nearest him again.

"Yes, that's right," he said, putting down his glass and turning around, seeming to want to talk now. "It was a small town."

Hatori took another bite of fish. It felt fresh and cool in his mouth, the taste of the sea. He now remembered the town they were referring to. He'd never been there but had heard of it. Just a typical small town, he thought, like the many around Japan, getting smaller all the time as people abandoned them to come to Tokyo or to Osaka. His parents had come from a small town not far from Tokyo. Then, when his father died, his mother had moved to Tokyo to open her place. Not really so different from this or from

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Mama-san's. She served food and drinks. She worked hard, but what did he really know of even her life, of what she went through? All he knew was what she had told him. Though they lived above the place, he seldom went near it. He'd climb up the back stairs and never even see it except for a glimpse of his mother through the window maybe, and he'd be asleep when she finally got home. If she got home. But what does it matter, he thought. She's dead now and her life has passed away like smoke before an altar, only her photograph remaining.

"Do you know anything about her husband?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, walking over to a window and opening it, letting a rush of cool air inside. "He and Namiki were friends before the war. In fact, all three of them were. They both were drafted at about the same time."

Hatori listened and remembered the blood red draft notices that had come to his friends, one after another. Everyone, it seemed, but him. "Namiki-san went to Manchuria," he said.

"So did her husband," she said. The air from the window felt good on his face. He was perspiring.

"And never came back," he said, wiping his forehead with the handcloth. None of them said anything for quite a few minutes. All of them seemed to be enjoying the fresh air.

"Were you in the war?" she asked.

"No," he said. He sensed that the other two men there certainly must have been. Farmboys shipped off to somewhere in the Pacific. His friends had gone. The war years came back to him like a ghostly spectre, hovering there over him in the room.

He was staying longer than he had planned. He felt hollow and wanted to be filled. He began to weave in and out of consciousness, beginning to feel a little afraid.

"She has a child, a daughter, right?" she asked finally, now just wasting time until closing time, cleaning up the counter where the others had been.

"Yes, she does," he said.

"She's cute. I mean I've seen her and talked to her a few times on the street, just the usual chatter. She seems friendly enough."

He was thinking of leaving, straightening himself up on the stool.

"It's kind of strange," she said matter-of-factly. "I don't know, but they look so different. Mama-san is so small, and the daughter is so large for her age."

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He stood up and pulled out his wallet, feeling sleepy and stupid for staying so long. "I don't know," he said, and paid. Walking outside, he could still hear her talking to herself. She thanked him. The air felt good. The willows were swaying in the breeze. He started to walk down the street, enjoying his weightlessness, and thought of her husband's emaciated face in the ward office.

A wind had come up and he felt a little cold, the last of the winter winds that would blow down from Siberia and across the Japan Sea. Up north it was still cold at night. He passed a small neighborhood shrine lit by a string of lights that swayed back and forth, all guarded by a pair of stone foxes on pedestals. When he rounded the corner, he heard shouting. Mama-san's place seemed to be closed, the lights out, but the upstairs lights were on, and the windows were open. He walked a few more steps so he could see inside and listen.

Suddenly he heard the back door slam. Her daughter ran from between the buildings and down the street.

Namiki-san was with her upstairs.

Hatori leaned against a lightpole and put his hands in his coat pockets.

"Shut up," Namiki shouted, obviously drunk, his face a puffy red. He grabbed her by the hair and pushed her off balance. He shouted something again and stepped back, seeming to be stunned. She wiped the hair from her face, trying to regain her composure.

They were talking about money.

"Be a man," she said and turned away from the window, looking outside into the darkness. She said something again and brushed the hair from her eyes, picking up a drink with the other hand from the table, looking straight ahead into nothing.

Hatori backed up a little and looked at his watch. It had stopped at about eleven. He walked down the street, pulling up his collar and dipping his hands deep into his pockets. He felt curiously awake and sober. The last train was at midnight from Kita-Senju Station. Surely it wasn't that late yet. He walked the few blocks to the rebuilt part of town, suddenly bright and crowded with people, with lots of young salarymen and well-dressed young women hurrying to the next place. He let himself be shoved and pushed along with the others. Finally, he opened the door to a bar and walked again into the darkness.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

A Royal Dinner

by Lord Dunsany

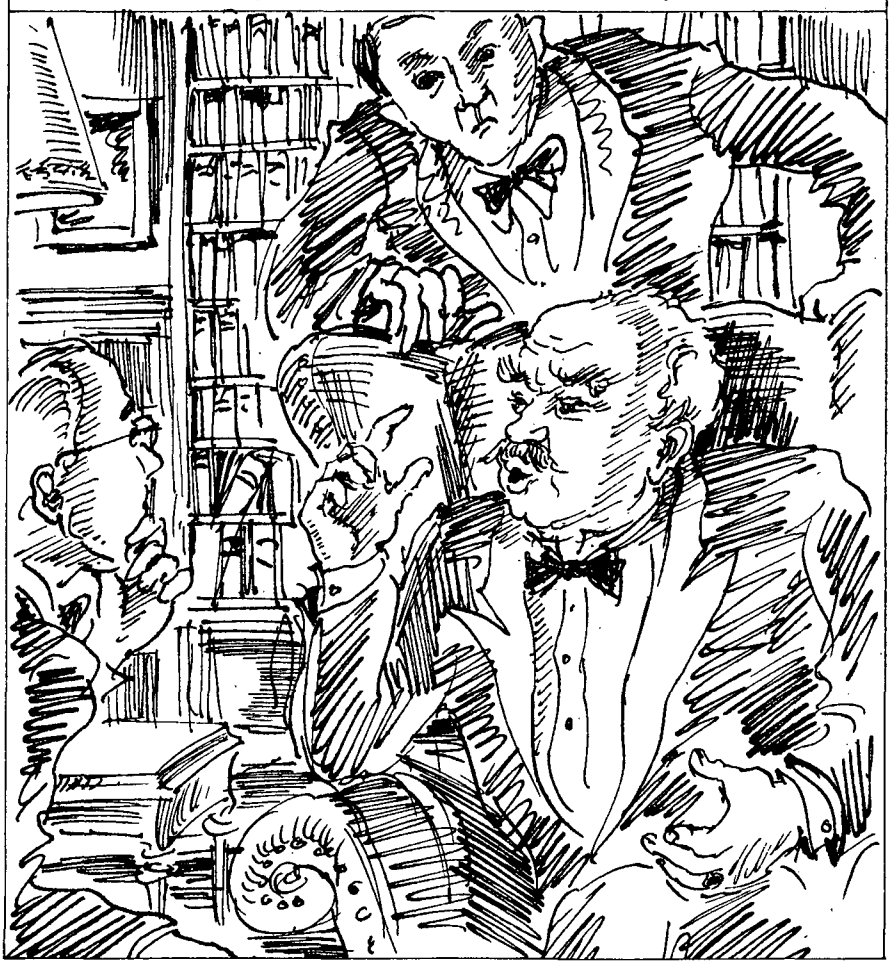

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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One day as I entered the Billiards Club I found Jorkens in the midst of a story. I remember his actual words as I came in: "I said to him, 'The moon will be much annoyed if you do.' " It was evident that he had been trying to alarm someone of inferior intelligence, who had probably annoyed *him*. And so it turned out, for he spoke of a palace of reeds and an African king, and a chair of mahogany in which he was sitting, a chair that was all in one piece, carved out of the trunk of a tree. All that came out as the story went on, but at the moment that I came in, the story seemed to have come to some sort of climax, for he told of the answer to his odd remark with some semblance of horror, simple though that answer appeared. "But he said to me," Jorkens went on, " 'We know that the white man can foretell eclipses, even though we don't know how; but an eclipse does not mean that the moon is angry. We have learned that. And you cannot trick us.'

"This knocked the bottom out of all I was going to say, with a single blow, and I saw he was going to eat me. I was in a nasty predicament, quite alone in that palace of reeds, sitting in a mahogany chair facing a cannibal. I don't know if any of you would have passed it off with nonchalance, but when I saw how things were, I admit I gripped the seat of my chair, gripped it suddenly on each side. I don't think I showed any other sign of uneasiness, but I did do that, and it's lucky I did. I changed my tactics then. I said to that king, or rather to his nasty little interpreter, 'Look here, if you do anything rash, I shall tell my people about you, and they will come with a great army, a very great army indeed; and they will come with a great many guns, that will go poom-pop, like that, and flames will rise up from them and your palace will only be smoke.' And I was going to tell him still more, but he interrupted me with a smile, and added that I would not have an opportunity of telling any people. When the nasty little interpreter told me that, I played my last card. 'I can speak with people who are not here,' I said. And, mind you, this was before the days of wireless, or at any rate before there were any private sets. And the king through his interpreter said, 'Pooh. Pooh.' And that was where I turned up my last card, so that he saw it. 'There was a traveler here,' I said, 'from the land of America; and I shall speak with his ghost, who will help me and who will tell my words to my people, for he is very angry with you because you ate him.'

"And the greedy smile went away from the king's face at that, and he tried to say that there had been no American there; and I

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said to him, 'He sat in this very chair.' And somehow he seemed to see I was speaking the truth, or at least to fear it. He turned to his interpreter, and they talked together awhile in low voices, for I didn't know the language, and didn't want to. I like to sit and talk a bit over my dinner with decent people, and I don't even see any harm in talking about one's food. It doesn't mean you are greedy. But I'd nothing to say to people who ate men. No, I never learned their foul language."

"What happened then?" I asked Jorkens.

"Oh, then," he said. "Why, then, that hungry king asked me what this traveler looked like, whose ghost I had said I saw. He was uneasy, and so was the interpreter, but he did not seem quite sure, or still had a lingering hope that I was inventing. I said that the ghost was long and thin, like mist coming up from a river. If the man were tall that would do very well, and most Americans that I've seen are; and, if he weren't, my description would pass as a description of ghosts in general, or river mists. It was upon the face that I concentrated, and I was going to win or lose by that. I said, 'The ghost is angry, and anger has altered his features, but his jaws are moving still, as they always were. His eyes are angry, but his jaws are quietly chewing.'

"And a look came into the interpreter's face when he heard me say that, like the look of a man who sees a ghost for himself. It was a look I rather liked. And I watched to see it go from his face to the face of the king, as he told him what I had said. He spoke quickly to the interpreter, and the reply came back like this: 'You must not say to the ghost anything I spoke hastily, until you understand what I really meant.' Then another talk with the interpreter, who then had the job of telling me, 'Maybe my interpreter has translated my words wrongly. If he has done so, he shall die.'

" 'Never mind that,' I said, for I saw I was winning now.

" 'What I meant,' he went on, 'was that you and I should surely dine together, together on mutton. If the interpreter said otherwise, he lied.'

" 'No doubt he lied,' I said.

" 'Yes, yes, I did,' said the interpreter, and passed on my words to the king. From then on everything went quite smoothly. The king was impressed with my magic and I offered to show him more; and several simple tricks, that would have never impressed him without any talk of the ghost, went down now quite well. Yes, a bit of magic is a very handy thing to travel with in all the wilder

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countries, and I certainly owe my life to it."

For once I was grateful to Terbut for helping to make things clear. "I can understand magic being convenient," he said. "But what I don't see so clearly is how you could know a traveler had been there before you, or that he came from America, or that he sat in that chair. Or . . . " But somehow his words dried up before Jorkens' smile. "Put your right hand under the side of the seat of your chair," said Jorkens, "about two inches, or three, from the front, and you can sometimes tell if an American has been using it much. It is where they park their chewing gum. And, after all, could you find a handier place for it?"

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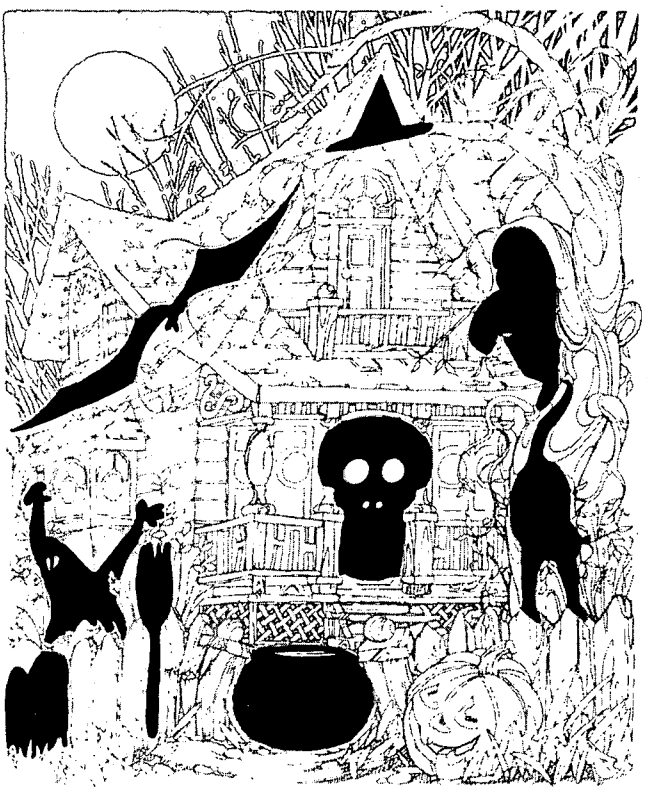

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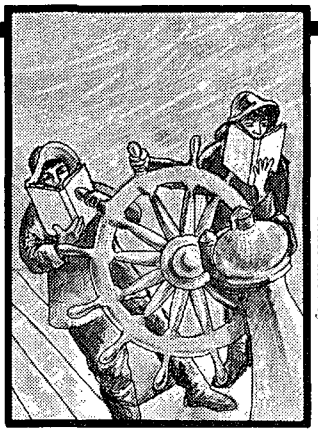

Illustration by Sheila Smith

In the last month or so, a number of new books have arrived by authors reviewed before in these pages. I thought I'd bring you up to date on those authors—their newest installments in their ongoing series and the new directions they may be taking.

Aaron Elkins' *Curses,* next to last in his Gideon Oliver series (the last was *Icy Clutches)* was reviewed in this column in December, 1989. But Aaron has another series starring art historian Chris Norgren, and the second in that series is **A Glancing Light** (Scribners, $18.95, 243 pp). Chris is putting together a show of northern European painters who were influenced by stays in Italy and has traveled to Bologna to oversee the shipments. While there, he encounters the police—it seems there are some stolen paintings, missing for three years, some of them owned by sponsors of his show, and the police hope that he will hear rumors about their whereabouts. Or do they? The officer in charge of the investigations keeps telling him to go home and get out of the way. When a close friend and local art dealer is mugged, Chris starts investigating on his own. Good setting, lots of action, a great primer on Renaissance and baroque art.

In the Winter Double Issue, 1989, I reviewed Lindsey Davis's *Silver Pigs,* a chronicle of Marcus Didio Falco, informer in Rome at the time of Vespasian. Marcus is back, working part-time (and not at all lucratively) for Vespasian in **Shadows in Bronze**

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(Crown, $19.00, 341 pp). As he disposes of the bodies (and the evidence) from *Silver Pigs,* he is assaulted. This leads him to Neapolis, disguised as a lead pipe salesman, to investigate a continuing plot to overthrow Vespasian. There are two pages of characters in a Dramatis Personae at the beginning of the book, and three maps at the end to help the reader through the detailed plot. It is perhaps mandatory that *Silver Pigs* be read first—there are many continuing characters, plot lines, and loose ends that wouldn't make sense otherwise. If you like historical novels, and are intrigued with Rome around A.D. 70, try this series.

Mortal Remains in Maggody by Joan Hess (Dutton, $17.95, 304 pp) is the fifth in her Maggody series. The third, *Much Ado in Maggody,* was reviewed in March, 1990. Chief of Police Arly (short for Ariel, which is how her mother spells "aerial") Hanks has to deal with the whole town of Maggody when a movie company comes to town to film *Wild Cherry Wine.* Few of the citizens, whose homes are used for sets and who actually may appear as bit characters in the movie, suspect that this film company is not all it should be. There are secrets in the backgrounds of each of the principals, and when these people start to die in particularly bloody ways, these secrets will out. Not the least—*Wild Cherry Wine* is a porn film. As usual, Hess fills the book with wit and humorous situations that contrast strongly with the blood and gore at the murder scenes. The citizens of Maggody alone make a visit to the series worth your while, and if you like Maggody, don't ignore Hess's Claire Malloy and Theo Bloomer series (the latter written under the name Joan Hadley).

Les Roberts has brought back Milan Jacovich in **Deep Shaker** (St. Martin's, $17.95, 248 pp). In this, the third of Roberts' "Cleveland" P.I. series *(Full Cleveland* was reviewed in April, 1990), drugs at the local high school, an apparent real estate scam, and a potentially shady car dealer combine to pressure Milan on the professional side, while friendship with old schoolmates, strained relationships with his own sons and ex-wife, and a deteriorating relationship with his girlfriend mess up his personal life. When the two sides of Milan's life merge at the school of his own son, things get really sticky. Some nice new characters are introduced, and just enough loose ends are left in Milan's personal life to make him real. Note: Roberts' other series, about Los Angeles actor/P.I. Saxon, is equally entertaining.

Joseph Hansen prefaces the title of his twelfth Dave Brandstetter book with the words "The Last Dave Brandstetter Mystery."

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When I previously reviewed *Obedience* (September, 1989), I remember hoping that Dave's retirement would not mean his last case, and felt relief with the publication of *The Boy Who Was Buried This Morning* (June, 1990). But **A Country of Old Men** (Viking, $17.95, 177 pp) does seem to indicate that Dave has completed a long and wonderfully written run. I like this series, and *A Country of Old Men* lived up to my expectations. Dave is drawn into an investigation of a child's abduction, the death of a rock musician, and the rumors surrounding the life of a reclusive novelist. All three events tangle with Dave's life and cause his lover and roommate, Cecil Harris, to worry about Dave's health. After all, Dave is nearing seventy, even if he doesn't look or act like it, and there is a family history of bad health. The ending is right, if not encouraging to those readers who await the *next* Brandstetter, but Hansen has written other mysteries and promises a new series based on his own life and times.

Bill Crider has two new books out, and neither is part of his Sheriff Dan Rhodes series (see *Death on the Move,* reviewed January, 1990) or his Professor Carl Burns series (see *Dying Voices,* June, 1990). **Dead on the Island** (Walker, $18.95, 192 pp) introduces Truman Smith, a "failed" P.I. who lives by painting houses on Galveston Island, Texas. Truman's specialty had been finding people, but when he couldn't find his own sister, he began to retreat into a world of music, Big Red soda, and jogging. When a high school buddy, a descendant of the "gangsters" who used to run the island, asks him to help find another missing girl, he begins to come back to life. Crider's series are generally spiced with humorous situations which, to me, seem uniquely Texan, and there are such situations in *Dead on the Island.* There is a more serious streak here, however, than in the other series, and the real setting of Galveston is a switch from Crider's previous fictitious locations.

The second Crider book is a non-series entry that is *totally* serious. Set in Houston, **Bloody Marks** (St. Martin's, $18.95, 296 pp) gives a multiple point of view look at a man who has, at the start of the book, killed nine women. Only the fact that these nine murders have not been solved lead the police to suspect (and wish it weren't so) that there is, indeed, a serial killer out there. We meet the next victim, the killer, the investigating officer, a possible witness, and three suspects. It is possible to identify the real killer, but the ending has enough suspense to make you forget that you guessed it earlier. As I said, not a "funny" book. Be prepared for a one-sitting read with a lot more blood than the typical Crider.

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Martha Grimes, last profiled in November, 1990, has at last had an American publication of **The Old Contemptibles** (Little, Brown, $19.95, 333 pp). In it, Richard Jury inexplicably is suspected of the murder of a woman he met in the street market only two weeks before. He has fallen hard for her and has even bought a ring. Melrose Plant and Marshall Trueblood are just back from Italy, where they have been trying to sabotage Vivian Rivington's upcoming marriage; their last-ditch attempt was to inform Vivian that Jury is engaged to a totally unsuitable woman. Little did they know! Anyway, Plant ends up as Jury's leg man again, impersonating a librarian, making up to a child, and being observed by the child's cat, at least until Jury can clear himself with the local police and travel to the country to investigate his lost lady-love's background. Not the most satisfying of mystery endings, but still more good insight into Jury, Plant, and even the enigmatic Vivian.

Katherine Hall Page won the Agatha for Best First Novel 1990 for *The Body in the Belfry,* reviewed in the December, 1990, column. Her heroine, Faith Sibley Fairchild, caterer and wife of a small-town minister, is vacationing with their new baby on an island off the Maine coast in **The Body in the Kelp** (St.Martin's, $16.95, 212 pp). Faith and her friend Pix Miller encounter murder and mayhem accompanied by hints at recipes, lots of local color, and several suspicious characters. The clue is to be found in a quilt Faith bought at an estate auction, so the reader learns a lot about quilt patterns as well as Maine food and scenery. The author is to be thanked for the diagram of the quilt so we can follow along in the sleuthing.

As you may have noticed, I like historical mysteries and am particularly fond of those written by Anne Perry (see reviews of *Bethlehem Road,* Mid-December, 1990, and *The Face of a Stranger,* March, 1991). **Highgate Rise** (Fawcett, $18.00, 330 pp) is the tenth in the Thomas and Charlotte Pitt series. Pitt is called in on an arson that has resulted in the death of a woman who appears well-liked and respected by her neighbors. Was she the intended victim, or was it her husband, the popular doctor? When the house where the doctor is staying temporarily is also burned, suspicion begins to move towards the potential enemies of the doctor, but both Charlotte and Thomas are uncomfortable with the direction the investigation is taking. So, apparently, is Great-Aunt Vespasia, sister Emily, and Emily's new husband, all of whom assist Charlotte in behind-the-scenes snooping while Thomas pursues more traditional means of investigation.

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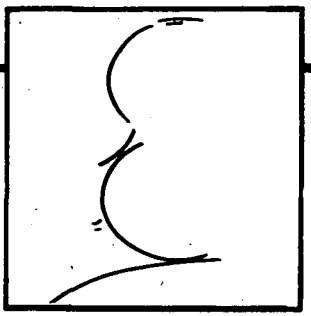
MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



V.I. Warshawski is a hard-drinking, tough-talking Chicago gumshoe, but the shoe leather is attached to a pair of stiletto heels. The detective who stars in this eponymous movie, in case you haven't figured it out, is a woman, a woman who's man enough to collar any lawbreaker. To top it off, she's played by Kathleen Turner.

What do the initials V.I. stand for? Well, that all depends on who asks the question and what answer strikes our heroine's fancy. To one sleazy sausage maker looking to buy her services, she offers a wiseguy "my first name." To a hunk-of-a-man she meets in her favorite watering hole, she purrs, "Virtuous, in a manner of speaking." More on the hunk later. To yet another man—a subject of her investigation—she replies, "Very inquisitive."

V.I. Warshawski is based on the protagonist of a series of detective novels by Sara Paretsky, although the movie doesn't come from one particular book and Paretsky did not have a hand in the screenplay.

The pretty P.I. falls into a case when, her personal life in shambles, she repairs to her home-turf bar. There, she trips a man who catches her eye (see hunk above). The man, we learn, is Boom Boom Grafalk, former professional hockey star. The two hit it off but call it an early night. Boom Boom promises to call her soon.

Very soon, he appears at her door—actually, her bathroom door—sullen thirteen-year-old girl in tow. It's Kat, his daughter (he's divorced). He begs her to watch the kid while he goes

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to a meeting. The meeting, it turns out, is explosive. Explosive enough to get him put in the permanent penalty box.

So the detective—who knows enough about kids to snap at her new charge, "I had a kid once, I killed it when it became a teenager"—is stuck with young Kat. And in a moment of maternal tenderness, she promises Kat she'll find out who killed her dad.

This isn't the greatest unsolved mystery in the world, but Warshawski, particularly as Kathleen Turner presents her, is such an engaging character that tracking down the killer is secondary to enjoying the film.

The relationship between the hardboiled female detective and her sassy young partner (yes, Kat insists on tagging along) is delightful. Angela Goethals, as Kat, is refreshing and funny.

On the murder front, there are all the elements of a *noir*ish potboiler, starting with the private eye who's got a fine pair of what they used to call gams. The explosive hockey player and his two brothers own a shipping firm on the seedy Chicago waterfront. There is some doubt whether Grafalk Shipping really does own the property in question; if not, the question is, who does?

Add to that a further family bone of contention. When Kat's father, the hockey player, divorced her mother (Nancy Paul), an alcoholic adulteress, mom married his brother. Got that? Young Kat, described by one of her uncles as a "wharf rat" who grew up on the waterfront, is not fond of her mother.

The murky waters of this murder mystery also include a strike by the longshoremen (guys you don't mess with), wealthy Japanese businessmen (guys you don't mess with), and an overweight mob enforcer who tells Warshawski, "The only reason you ain't dead already is 'cause we was in the same homeroom." This slob she messes with.

Along the way we get action in the form of a winding speedboat chase with young Captain Kat behind the wheel of one boat and with a shootout finale at a dark, oily dock. Most of the action, however, comes from a constant barrage of one-liners from the mouth of Warshawski. But that's not a bad thing.

As a 1990's Windy City Sam Spade, Kathleen Turner's V.I. Warshawki uses simple legwork to crack her case. She talks to everybody she thinks might be able to help. As for those initials, that name? Any wonder why private detective Victoria Iphigenia uses initials?

Not after you see the film adventures of this, pardon the expression, tough broad.

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THE STORY THAT WON

Photo by Algimantas Kezys

The July Mysterious Photograph contest was won by David Bart of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Honorable mentions go to John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Rhett Athan Bartha of Beaverton, Oregon; Mary A. Welsh of Applegate, Michigan; Hannah M. Scheihing of Sarasota, Florida; Greta Hemstrom of Olathe, Colorado; Judith Adelman of Pembroke Pines, Florida; Lee Grant of Memphis, Tennessee; Lynda Thomas of Utica, Michigan; and Dorothy Akers of Rio Rancho, New Mexico.

THE PERFECT PICKUP by David Bart

"Tell me again about that *perfect* extortion pickup, Arnie."

Arnie knew the old con thought he was a fool, but what the hey, there was nothing else to do in the cramped cell.

"The banker did what I told him . . ." Arnie began. "He gave the hundred grand in a maroon briefcase to the guy at the stadium entrance."

Grinning, the old con asked, "You mean the guy dressed in the pink shirt, tan slacks, and sunglasses, just like the other nine guys the courier service hired for you?"

Arnie nodded, ignoring the implied sarcasm. "Yeah, ten guys, all dressed alike and carrying maroon briefcases. I figured that after they went inside and spread out amongst all those people at the ball game, the FBI couldn't possibly watch them all and I could make the pickup without getting spotted."

"What went wrong?" the con asked, barely stifling an eruption of laughter.

Arnie glared at him a moment before continuing. "The stadium was empty when I went in . . . except for the ten guys hired as couriers and six FBI agents."

The old man sprayed the air space between them with a wet cackle, following by a belly laugh Arnie hoped would give him a heart attack.

"So there wasn't a crowd in the stadium 'cause one of the softball teams forfeited the game to moonlight as couriers with the agency *you* hired?"

Arnie reddened and turned his back, vowing never to tell the old creep the story again.

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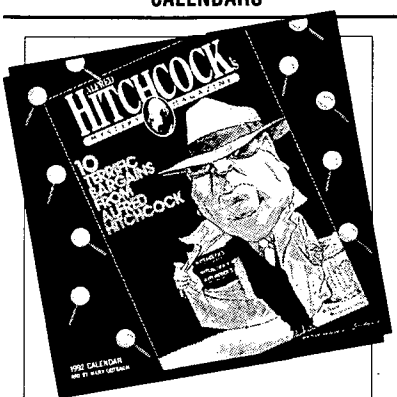

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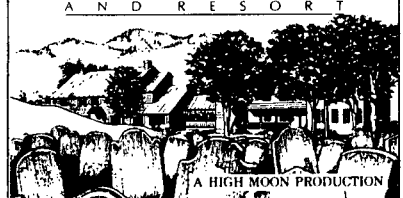

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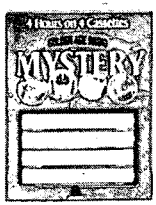

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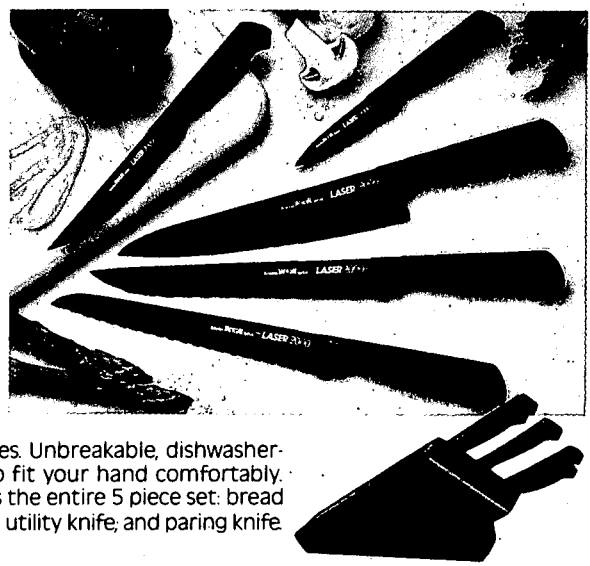

The secret behind Regent Scheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife; and paring knife. **$129.98** ($7.00) #A1933.

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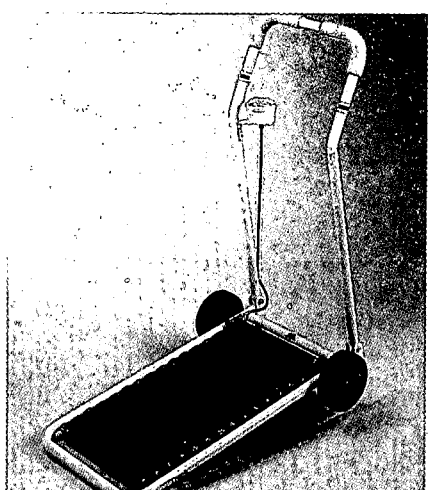

Staying in shape is vital for our health and well being with today's lifestyle. Getting to the gym may not always be easy in our busy lives. We have just the answer for all you people on the go or just for the ones who enjoy to get fit at home. That's why the Foldaway Exertrack is the perfect way to exercise. This personal treadmill has a speedometer/odometer to monitor speed and progress. It measures 38"x21"x3" and features a safe rubber track and an adjustable handlebar that faces forward or backward for running and walking comfort. No electrical connections or motors needed. Exercise has never been simpler. Order one today and get on the right track with the Exertrack. Folds away for easy storage, lightweight and compact. At a great price! **$131.98** ($15.00) #A1977.

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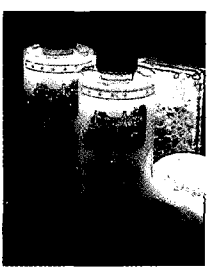
▼ EVERYTHING BAG

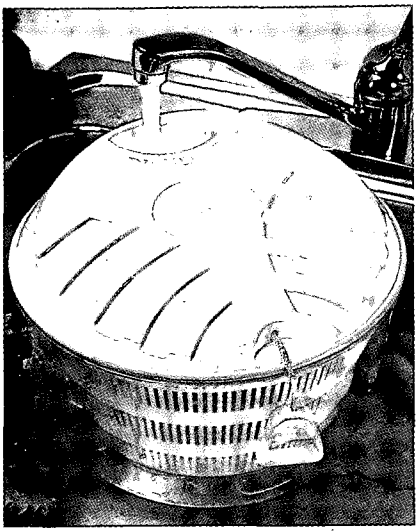
People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its *normal width—to a full eight inches.* Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **$24.98** ($4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.

▼ FOOD FOR WOOD



Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **$13.98** ($3.25) #A14312.

▼ SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY



The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables, does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good drenching before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The Jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. **$19.98** ($4.50) #A1520.

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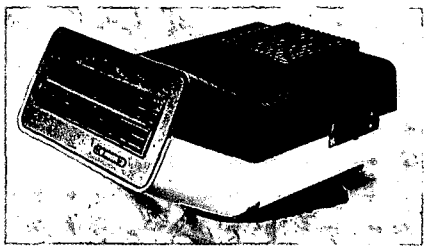

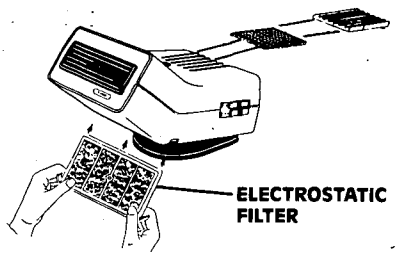

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